

*The* TECHNIQUE *of*  
PLAY PRODUCTION

*By*  
A. K. BOYD

THIRD REVISED EDITION



GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD  
LONDON SYDNEY TORONTO BOMBAY

First published 1934  
by GEORGE G. HARRAP & Co, LTD  
182 High Holborn, London, W.C.1

*New edition, reset, 1945*  
*Reprinted 1947*

*Third edition, revised, 1951*

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Dewey Decimal classification (Standard): 792.92

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*Composed in Garamond type and printed by The Ryecroft Press, Edinburgh*  
*Made in Great Britain*

## PREFACE

THE scope of this book is limited, and its limitation alone justifies the writing of yet another guide to play production. It will be noted that there are no separate chapters on scenery, lighting, costume, make-up, and the like, which (although they certainly come within the domain of the amateur producer) are dealt with only in a general and non-technical way. Many books have been published on these branches of stagecraft, to which those in need of technical instruction must refer.

This book, then, neglecting byways of the producer's craft (without thereby casting any aspersion on their importance), concentrates on the purely histrionic side. It attempts to analyse the technical expedients by which a play is brought to life and 'got across,' and to trace to its technical origin the elusive quality of 'finish.' It is in these matters, not in imaginative treatment, that most amateur productions fail.

The treatment of the subject does not begin with the alphabet. There is no section on "How to choose a Play"; the actor is not told to make his turns inward and not outward with reference to the audience. It is assumed (and herein this book differs from many others on the subject) that no one will be so benighted as to attempt to produce a play until he has had *some* experience of acting and has mastered a few of the elements which even amateur actors learn. The stage of dramatic experience at which it is hoped this book will be useful is that of the person who, having taken part in several indifferent amateur productions, feels it would be interesting to take part in a good one.

The art of the actor is only dealt with as a branch (though the most important branch) of the art of the producer. I wish to emphasize, in spite of insistence on technique, that *an actor who possesses technique only is a mere box of*

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tricks. There can be no good acting without feeling and artistry.

Everything that follows is based on actual experience of watching, producing, or acting in amateur plays. It is written for amateurs by an amateur, and it is hoped that it will meet specific amateur needs. The greatest amateur need—and this is repeated at frequent intervals throughout the book—is more exact attention to significant detail.

Much of the substance of this book is taken from two articles which were published in *Drama*, and several passages are reproduced verbatim. I wish to express my thanks to the editor for giving permission to reprint them.

A. K. B.

## NOTE TO THE NEW EDITION

THIS book was thoroughly revised and amended, and considerably enlarged, for the second edition of 1945, and some additions have now been made with a view to stressing certain points where recent experience has suggested that it would be helpful. A few illustrations have been added from more recent plays, but none of the extracts originally given has ceased, or will ever cease, to illustrate the relevant point of dramatic technique.

A. K. B.

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TO  
MY FRIENDS  
OF THE  
ABINGDON DRAMA CLUB



## CHAPTER I

### THE PRODUCER AND THE AUDIENCE

AMATEUR acting has done much for the art of the theatre, and may do much more. Amateur societies feed the theatrical audience with individuals who, from personal experience of the actor's craft, are more appreciative and critical, and more easily interested, than other theatregoers. They encourage, in the main, a higher standard of intelligence in dramatic affairs, and provide support for the professional manager who is prepared to aim at the best in his choice of play. They have done much of the experimental work of the theatre, and modern methods of production are often indebted to their venturesome initiative. But it would not be true to say that, as a whole, they convert their audiences to enthusiasm for the drama, and anyone who has frequented amateur performances of plays must be aware that many of them do nothing but harm. The standard of amateur performance is often deplorably low, and far too many amateur presentations of plays show a miserable and complacent inefficiency.

The responsibility for an unsatisfying amateur performance rests almost invariably on the production. There is much weak acting on the amateur stage, but weak acting need not of itself ruin a play beyond redemption. No average collection of individuals is so devoid of histrionic ability that a play cannot be found which it can act presentably—and amateur actors are not average individuals, but are chosen from the inner ring of those who have the will to act. Skilful production can make a successful performance with any average material, provided that the play is chosen with reference to the actors' abilities; while no play acted by amateurs can survive a blundering production. These facts are axiomatic; yet so little are they understood that many amateur societies pay no more attention to the

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cannot be sufficiently condemned, since, if a producer has a personal message to deliver to the public, he should write his own play, and not commandeer as a vehicle some other man's; but the condemnation comes outside the scope of this work, which is not intended for such highly skilled self-exploiters. Let it be repeated, then, that the producer's function is no more and no less than to interpret the intention of the author, and since the author has chosen the vivid medium of the drama, he can only do so by 'bringing the play to life.' When he has done this he will have established the only condition in which a dramatic message can reach its audience.

In order to interpret a play the producer must first understand it, or, if this is demanding too much, he must at least have formed some hypothetical conception of what is the author's meaning. There is no specific for enlarging the understanding, and small possibility of success for the man who undertakes a play beyond his intellectual compass. It is not, however, in understanding that amateur producers fail, but in the craft necessary for a successful interpretation. Many of them, supported by the consciousness of high artistic aspiration, have little or no knowledge of the technical devices without which their loftiest conceptions will never kindle an emotional spark in the heart of an audience. In their endeavour to capture the imaginative heart of drama they are inclined to neglect altogether the mundane task of 'getting it across.' Nothing is 'got across' in the theatre by the light of nature, which shines but rawly on the stage. Only the art which conceals art can make the unnatural posturing, grouping, and timing of the stage spring to life when viewed from the auditorium. There is a dangerous theory abroad that unsophisticated actors get plays across by their 'sincerity.' This may be true of certain plays, but actors so commended should view the tribute with suspicion. It is doubtful if it often means more than that they have obviously been trying so hard in so artless a fashion that it is unkind to criticize. Producers who depend on 'sincerity' are mostly ignorant of the

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technical expedients which will gain their work a more balanced appreciation. Others despise them as a collection of theatrical tricks proper enough to naturalistic acting, but having no relation to acting in the more imaginative ranges of drama. They are wrong. There can be no living art, and no acting, without technique. You cannot 'stylize' your acting until you can act.

For the true interpretation of drama the producer must put before himself five objects, which can be attained only by technical efficiency. They can be represented by the following keywords:

(1) Illusion. This is no mere handmaid of realism. Dramatic illusion is as essential for the poetical, or fantastic, or symbolical, or expressionist, or surrealist (or any other kind of '-ist') play as it is for the most severely realistic. Its maintenance demands from the audience a continued "suspension of disbelief." The necessity for it renders 'finish' in production not a mere professional frill, but an essential. An unfinished performance cannot consistently maintain dramatic illusion, and therefore cannot worthily represent the author's intention. Any awkwardness or hesitation or uncertainty, any hitch or blunder or false emphasis, instantly puts the audience outside the orbit of dramatic illusion and keeps them there for a shorter or longer period. For a moment at least they have seen the wheels going round; the fault in the mechanism has made them aware that the play is but a piece of mechanism after all. The creation and maintenance of dramatic illusion demand positive virtues in acting and presentation, but no less important is the negative virtue of avoiding obvious imperfection. Few amateur performances possess the smooth efficiency which dramatic illusion demands. To obtain it must therefore be the first object of the producer, to which all his technical resources should be directed. It cannot be secured, as is sometimes thought, by the final polish of an expert hand at the last few rehearsals. It is a quality woven into the texture of the acting gradually, at all rehearsals from the first to the last.

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(2) **Significance.** The full meaning of a good play cannot present itself spontaneously. It can only be brought out by the technical skill of the producer. A play badly produced is at best little better than a play read in the study by a layman; at worst it is a misleading travesty of the author's intention. The printed page maintains a flat level, in which the significant and the insignificant are treated with equal emphasis. Even the expert cannot extract its whole significance from one reading, while the inexperienced layman will not do so by fifty readings. When the play is presented on the stage it is the duty of the producer to interpret its significance to the most inexperienced layman at his first and only sight of it. Significance embraces both the general mood and intention of the play, and the thousand minutiae which cumulatively demonstrate that mood and intention. The marking of significance in its larger aspect depends on the sensibility and percipience of the producer and cannot be taught; but the marking of significance in detail is achieved by the use of technical devices, many of which are explained later in this book. The 'making of points,' in which many amateurs notoriously fail, is one aspect of this interpretation of significance, but there are many others. Anything is dramatically significant which illuminates the purpose of a play, or advances the plot, or vitalizes a situation, or exhibits character, or lightens obscurity. The good producer, having determined where significance lies, makes it leap to the comprehension of the audience. The very good producer obtains his effect on the audience without betraying the means.

(3) **Suspense.** Among the many definitions of drama which have been attempted—"the essence of drama is conflict," "the key of drama is preparation," "drama is human character in action," and the like (most of which have their large share of truth)—no producer should forget the dictum, in its various forms, that drama is "emotion in suspense." Admittedly this is a factor to be supplied primarily in the writing of the play. No producer can introduce an element of suspense where the author has

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entirely omitted it. But where the author has done his part the producer can and must apply his skill to translate it into action. (He must heighten the suspense of the written words and create that emotional tension in the mind of the audience without which the play is acted *in vacuo*. (In order to create suspense the producer must concentrate on atmosphere, tempo, movement or absence of movement, and the emotional pitch of the voice.) Like all stage effects, suspense can only be achieved by the accumulation of significant detail. The question is dealt with further at p. 95, and in the analysis of Eugene O'Neill's *In the Zone* in Chapter X.

(4) *Climax*. This again is a matter in which the producer is powerless if the author has made no use of climax in his writing. But any well-written play possesses an emotional rhythm which it is the business of the producer to analyse and to translate to the stage. In many plays the rhythm takes the form of a series of curves each culminating in a climax, and leading up to the final dominating climax. All the producer's technical resources are required in the translation of the emotional curve, with its even tenor of preparation, its rising tension, its climax, and its relaxation of tension, which, if not carefully handled, succeeds only in being anticlimax. It is not only the play that has its climax, but the act, the scene, the episode, the speech, and often the sentence. The treatment of this rhythmic curve can only be shown in relation to particular plays, and it has been attempted in Chapter X (see also p. 95).

(5) *Balance*. This may be conveniently inserted here, although it is less a matter of technique than of discernment and dramatic sense. Balance refers both to the various parts of the play and, more particularly, to the characters. The producer must see that minor episodes are not given undue importance and that minor characters do not overshadow more important ones. Since the sympathy of an audience plays so large a part in its understanding of a piece, he must see that it is directed to the right quarter. One of the commonest causes of the failure of a play to create its

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true effect in performance is that a character has alienated instead of winning sympathy, or has won sympathy when it should not. It is also not unknown that an audience should pronounce a play to be bad, and at the same time praise as outstanding the actor who has been chiefly responsible for wrecking it. This subject is dealt with more fully in Chapter VII, under "Characterization."

Let it be repeated that a producer who does not, consciously or unconsciously, seek to achieve the objects given above cannot hope to do justice to a competent author in the presentation of his play, and that the only method by which these objects can be attained is the insistence on significant detail, directed by technical knowledge.

It is a platitude—but none the less true—to say that drama is unique among the arts in that it depends on the spectator for completeness. A poem or a picture or a symphony has an independent life, but a play only begins to live when the emotional circuit between actors and audience is established. This being the case, it is surprising how many amateur producers take insufficient pains to make smooth the path of the audience. Far too often their whole attitude on this matter is incredibly distorted, as is shown by the frequency with which the audience is blamed for the failure of a play (in as far as amateurs ever recognize that their own plays are failures). In reality, the unintelligence or insensibility of the audience can justly be blamed only at the cost of admitting colossal ineptitude in the choice of play. (An exception to this statement must be made in the matter of new plays, since nobody knows what a play is like until it has been acted. But amateurs normally select those which have been successfully presented many times.)

Assuming that reasonable discretion has been shown in the choice of play, the manner in which it is received by the audience is the first, last, and only true test of its successful presentation. If the audience react at every moment of it just as the producer and actors would wish them to react (except for the few hysterical females in a village audience

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whose reactions are unpredictable), the play has been well performed; if they react otherwise, or do not react at all, or show the slightest sign of restlessness, the play has been badly performed and is a failure, whatever congratulatory persons may say afterwards and whatever the views of the reporter as stated in the local paper. Admittedly there are good and bad audiences, but no audience is bad in the sense that it will not react to a good play well done and not beyond its intellectual capacity. The bad audience is ordinary neutral humanity, ready enough to dance if some one will pipe to it skilfully: the good audience is an uncovenanted benefit, being artificially predisposed to appreciation by dinner or beer or friendliness.

A good play, then, well chosen, can only be considered successful if the audience is held throughout. The producer must have his eye on the audience from the first rehearsal and concentrate on making things easy without making them crudely obvious. The audience cannot be held unless it understands, and it will not understand if it be bored or irritated or befuddled or misled. The following are the chief matters in which inexpert producers put obstacles in the way of the audience's full and easy comprehension.

(1) **The Bad Beginning.** The producer who does not take particular pains to render the beginning of a play easily intelligible is putting unnecessary difficulties in the way of the audience. Anyone who has ever read a play knows that the early pages of it, during which the characters and their relationships are fitting themselves into place in the mind, demand more concentration than the remainder. The audience in the theatre, however, is concentrating less at the beginning of the play than at any other time, partly owing to physical distractions and partly for psychological reasons. The producer must make allowance for this indubitable fact, or he is unnecessarily deferring the moment when the audience begin to know what the play is about and to take an interest in it. The first few minutes of a play should be more deliberate, definite, and clear-cut than the

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rest. (It is an advantage, when possible, to start the scene with a silence, because the first sentences, if spoken immediately after the rise of the curtain, will inevitably be lost. All characters should speak slower and more clearly until the audience has become accustomed to the pitch of their voices (and this applies even more emphatically to characters speaking in dialect). Finally, it should be remembered that the beginning of a play has its own scale of significance. Any detail which helps to elucidate the existing situation is intensely significant. Names and relationships and clues to time or place must be forced upon the notice of the audience by the devices which later in the play are reserved for more important matters. (The audience have come for entertainment and not for intellectual effort;) they will not grudge intellectual effort later, when they have been interested, but (they cannot be interested until they know what is happening.) Therefore the producer must spoon-feed them at the start, luring them into effortless comprehension, which is the condition in which he can tighten his grip on them.

It may be said in passing that in this, as in many other matters, the cunning of the producer will not be observed by the average member of the audience. (They will not notice whether the beginning of the play is made easy or difficult—unless it is too difficult, when they will blame the play.)

(2) **Inaudibility.** This point is given prominence because of its supreme importance, though it is too obvious to need stressing. Few producers are so blind as not to recognize that inaudibility is an unfailing source of irritation and loss of interest, and when they fail to secure audibility it is generally not their fault, but the fault of the actor, who cannot be trained to use his voice correctly in the time available. Most actors who are inaudible speak too quickly, or do not use their lips and teeth, or fail to pitch their voices to the size of the auditorium, or swallow the words and syllables they think unimportant, or drop their voices at the end of sentences. All these are faults which the producer can do something to eradicate. It will not be out of place



to mention here the practice, in which even some professional producers err, of encouraging actors to 'throw lines away.' In so far as this is a device for putting emphasis on what is significant by slurring over what is insignificant, it is legitimate and even necessary. But if by 'throwing away' is meant, not 'making unimportant,' but 'making inaudible' (and some producers actually go so far), the practice is indefensible. If it is necessary to give reasons against so glaring an error in tactics two should suffice: *first*, few plays can be so inconceivably badly written as to contain lines which serve no purpose at all, and a producer who is so misguided as to select one of them for performance would do better to prune away the otiose passages altogether and act only the part of the play which matters; *secondly*, the irritation caused is the same whether the inaudible lines are important or unimportant, since the audience, not having heard them, cannot tell which they are.

(3) *Invisibility.* This hindrance to comprehension covers inadequate stage-lighting and other errors which prevent the audience from apprehending significance by the eye. The whole question of stage-lighting is debatable, and opinions vary between the extreme views—that its function is chiefly decorative and emotional, and that its function is purely illuminant. Most producers, except those of the 'extreme left' in theatrical matters, are agreed that lighting should combine both functions. The advocates of the darkened stage may well find approval from an audience as extreme as themselves, but they are enormously increasing their difficulties in the interpretation of most plays. There is no question that restrained lighting can make beautiful and effective pictures, but the producer who indulges in it except for particular effects and for short periods is emphasizing the pictorial aspect of drama at the expense of more important aspects. He is also ignoring the facts, firmly established by all theatrical experience, that inability to see the features of the actor soon produces irritation (and in the opening scene of a play exasperation), and that it is impossible to follow with concentration for more than a

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short period the words of an invisible or semi-visible speaker—a statement which remains true of the theatre even in the age of broadcasting.

Apart from the question of lighting, there are many other ways of depriving an audience of the assistance of the eye—by masking, bad grouping, bad placing of furniture, bad scenery design, and insufficient display of small but important properties. These matters are too obvious to be discussed in detail, but not so obvious that they are not a frequent cause of offence. How many theatregoers, even in West End theatres, have not found on occasion after paying for expensive seats that important parts of the action are entirely invisible to them? Even if theatres in the past have been badly designed, an intelligent producer can do better than that. But, whatever the professionals may do, the amateur, who has no margin of safety in 'getting the play across,' cannot afford to deprive his audience of comfortable and continuous vision.

(4) Monotony. (It is obvious that monotony produces boredom.) If a play produces boredom by its dullness it is probably the producer's fault for not evoking its true significance (or, alternatively, for choosing a dull play): if it produces boredom by monotony it is unquestionably the producer's fault. Dialogue, however intellectually dull, need never be audibly monotonous. (The methods of avoiding monotony—by introducing light and shade, by variety of inflexion, by changes of pace, by movement, and above all by making the dialogue progress in ascending and descending curves rather than on a level plane—are all dealt with later.) It is enough to mention the failing here, so that the producer, ever watchful on behalf of the audience, may recognize it and strive to avoid it.

(5) Obscurity. This is the positive form of the vice represented negatively by the failure to evoke significance. It appears in such matters as confused actions, where it is impossible to see clearly what has happened, characters addressing each other by their wrong names (though the producer can hardly be blamed for that, unless he has failed

to point out at rehearsals that it matters), dealing with complicated phases of the plot too quickly for comprehension, sentences habitually twisted so that they are meaningless, and, generally, in everything which darkens rather than illuminates the meaning of a play. It is roughly true to say that no actor can convey the meaning of a sentence unless he understands it himself, yet many producers allow him to try. In Shakespeare and other writers where textual difficulties arise it is but reasonable to excise ruthlessly the passages from which the learned of several centuries have failed to extract an agreed meaning. Another cause of obscurity appears especially in Elizabethan plays, where, through mere wantonness, the words spoken are stultified by neglect of an implicit action. How often is it seen, when Macbeth says at the beginning of the banquet,

Ourself will mingle with society,  
And play the humble host.  
*Our hostess keeps her state, but in best time*  
We will require her welcome,

that neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth does any such thing! Stage directions explicitly printed may be ignored at the discretion of the producer, but those which are implied in the text must be observed out of ordinary consideration for the playwright and the audience. Another example from *Macbeth*: in a London production when Malcolm said to Macduff,

\* What, man! ne'er pull your hat upon your brows,

Macduff, so far from suiting the action to the word, wore no hat. If the hat presented difficulty in the period of costume chosen, what but a wilful desire to make nonsense of the words prevented the producer from cutting the line? In another London production when Hamlet addressed the First Player,

O, my old friend! Thy face is valanced since I saw thee last; comest thou to beard me in Denmark?

the Player was utterly clean-shaven. On what principle

did the producer work in thus retaining a pun, but ensuring that it should be pointless? These are admittedly mere trifles, but no trifle is beneath the notice of the good producer.

It is always profitable to learn from the errors of the great. In Komisarjevsky's production of *Macbeth* at Stratford such wilful havoc was wrought with the intelligibility of the play by the use made of the settings that no one unfamiliar with the story could possibly have followed it. There were four different sets, so employed that Banquo and Lady Macduff were both murdered in Macbeth's banqueting hall, and the avenging forces at Birnam Wood occupied the same castle courtyard in which Lady Macbeth walked in her sleep and Macbeth armed for the battle. These pranks may do for Stratford, but they would not do for the Old Vic,<sup>1</sup> and certainly the amateur must be more considerate. An audience may be asked to supply its own scenery, but not to translate a visible courtyard into a wood. There can be no doubt how such wanton creation of obscurity would have been viewed by the man of the theatre who wrote "suit the action to the word, the word to the action."

(6) **Misdirection.** The good producer directs his audience along the emotional or intellectual road of the play by signposts of significant detail: where he obtrudes insignificant detail he is erecting a misleading signpost. How often has a member of the audience been heard to say that he expected some circumstance in the play to recur later with decisive effect, when in reality it passes away with no determinant influence and is never heard of again! When this occurs either the author or the producer (but certainly in part the producer) has been at fault. Judicious 'planting' (i.e., forcing on the attention of the audience some fact or some property which is to be important later on) is one of the producer's obvious duties. He must see that he does

<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps it would be more correct to say, for the 'old Old Vic.' The 'new Old Vic' is prepared to destroy the whole point of the revelry scene in *Twelfth Night* by placing it in the street, instead of in Olivia's house.

not plant anything which is not meant to grow. "The key of drama is preparation," and to prepare for something which does not happen is bad dramatic art. Even twists and surprises in the action must be inherent in the plot or the characters, and should be recognized as inevitable in retrospect. The loose end, the red herring, and the *cul de sac* play no part in drama, and the producer who allows the audience to be misdirected is working counter to the purpose of the play.

(An obvious exception to the above occurs in the presentation of detective plays, where the principles involved approximate to those of a parlour game, and not of drama. When the aim of the author is bewilderment rather than illumination, and capricious surprise rather than inevitable advance, it is evident that the false clue and the loose end must be important instruments for securing the desired effect. The principles of production discussed in this section deal with more orthodox, universal, and permanent forms of drama.)

(7) **Delay.** Many amateur producers accept responsibility for the mood of the audience when the curtain is up, but wash their hands of it when the curtain is down. In reality, for the purposes of truly presenting a play, the intervals are almost as important as the action. (A late start is unhelpful to the actors, and no play can survive intervals which are excessive in number or length. Any elaboration of scenery is unjustifiable which transforms the intervals from welcome periods of relaxation to ages of restless boredom. (In arranging the number and length of the intervals the producer should consider even such mundane matters as the comfort of the seats provided, the temperature of the theatre, whether the audience can conveniently leave their places, and whether there is anywhere for them to go if they do.) These considerations are important, not for any humanitarian reasons (though it is always wise to be kind to people whose money you have taken, and hope to take again), but because they are an integral part of the process of getting a play across. Only

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makes no differentiation between amateur and professional. The following authentic snatch of conversation after a performance of *The Admirable Crichton* by schoolboys is revealing: A. "What did you think of the play?" B. "It was marvellous. The boys were terribly good." A. "But I heard that you came out after the second act." B. "Yes. I couldn't stand the whole thing." In this fragment the dual judgment of the average audience is perfectly enshrined—the true reaction during the play, and the utterly worthless comment afterwards. Such misguided tolerance is accorded particularly to school plays, which (to the far-reaching detriment of drama) are rarely judged by absolute standards. There is no reason—except bad production—why plays in boys' schools at any rate should not be able to stand up to objective criticism.

Finally it can be stated with certainty that the average audience at an amateur performance cannot correctly allot praise or blame as between author, actors, and producer. If the play is successful they will praise all three. Should it be a failure they will blame the author and possibly the actors, but the producer will emerge untarnished, as having had no opportunity with such inferior material. To be able to analyse the responsibility for the failure of a play, to distinguish the play from the acting and both from the production, to detect the specious actor who ruins a good play, the inefficient and unimaginative producer who ruins good acting, and the bad play which stultifies the good producer—these are faculties which belong only to the most expert and experienced critic. The average audience has no qualifications for such difficult and technical judgments.

The producer must find what consolation he may in the certainty that, while the ultimate responsibility for success or failure is his, no audience will give him either the praise or the blame which he deserves. He must seek his reward in the reception of the play during its performance. This cannot lie, and its sincerity cannot be questioned. It is worth more than all expressed opinions.

## CHAPTER II

### SPEECH

IN this and the succeeding chapters an attempt is made to explain the technical resources by which a producer secures his objects of creating dramatic illusion, conveying significance, maintaining suspense, and achieving dramatic climax—the four essentials of the true interpretation of drama. The various instruments at the disposal of the producer—speech, movement, and the rest—are treated separately, because there is no other way, but it need not be explained that in actual employment speech, movement, and gesture are all blended into an organic whole, which is the art of acting.

Before dealing specifically with dramatic speech it is appropriate here to stress the general fact that the chief aim of the actor, to which all his efforts should be directed, is to show *the working of his mind*. The best actor is he who best conveys to the audience, not merely his thought, but the process by which his thought is reached. Printed words must, if they mean anything, express thought; but printed words are not speech, and cannot in themselves be dramatic; they become dramatic when life is breathed into them by the actor who, by speaking them, shows their relation to the working of his mind. Often on the stage the thought in the mind is directly opposed to the thought expressed by the words. The printed line may be, "That is kind of you"; but we all know how such gentle words can be made to reveal bitterness, even savage bitterness, in the mind of the speaker. In so far as the producer can help an actor in his speech, movement, or gesture, it must always be remembered that he should be helping him to reveal *the working of his mind*.

Speech is the most important of the instruments with which the actor creates his effects. The human voice has almost unlimited resources, and it is in their artistic use that the good actor particularly shows his quality. The

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difference between the average amateur standard of acting and the professional standard is most glaringly shown in the management of the voice. Many amateur producers have everything to learn about dramatic speech, and the measure of their insufficiency is the fact that they do not even notice the difference between the quality of the speech in an amateur and a professional rendering of a play. Nor will the majority of an average audience, but they will unquestionably notice the difference in the play when they have heard it both well and badly spoken.

The treatment of this subject is extremely difficult, since there exists no method of connoting on paper the inflexions of the human voice. But it is hoped that by having his attention directed to such points as can be explained verbally the would-be producer may find his perceptions awakened and his ear sensitized to subtleties of tone and inflexion in professional acting which he has previously missed.

The first point to be appreciated is that the speech of the stage is a separate and distinct language, to be heard nowhere except on the stage. The average playgoer thinks that an actor who is 'natural' on the stage speaks naturally. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Except in occasional sentences (which gain effect by their sudden mimicry of everyday inflexions), the speech of even the most 'naturalistic' actor is based on a traditional technique which has little in common with ordinary life. The inexperienced producer can demonstrate this to himself conclusively at the cost of a gramophone record. He will probably be under the impression that most of the plays of Mr Noel Coward are written in the idiom of everyday conversation (and in this he will be roughly correct), but he will almost certainly proceed to the conclusion that in these plays, as acted and produced by their author, the idiom of everyday conversation is translated on the stage into the inflexions of everyday speech. In this he will be completely wrong. Mr Noel Coward's plays so interpreted could not survive their first night. Let him convince himself by reading aloud in what he considers is the correct



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manner to be employed on the stage the scene in *Private Lives* where Elyot Chase (Mr Noel Coward) and Amanda Prynne (Miss Gertrude Lawrence), meeting on the balcony of an hotel, find that their affection has survived divorce. Then let him play on the gramophone the H.M.V. record (C 2043) in which this scene is reproduced. Let him notice, for example, the inflexions of this passage in the record:

AMANDA. I swear I'll never mention her name again.

ELYOT. Good. And I'll keep off yours.

AMANDA. Thank you.

ELYOT. Not at all.

If his own version bears any resemblance to that of Mr Coward and Miss Lawrence he may have some reason to think that he is competent to produce modern light comedy. If it does not he should be aware that he has everything to learn. This record, so far from reproducing the inflexions of everyday speech, shows that the finished modern comedy actor gains most of his effects by cutting clean across these inflexions, making under-emphasis do the work of emphasis, and introducing variations of pitch and tone which are utterly foreign to the drabness of real conversation and yet in some mysterious way seem to echo its vocal effect. This example has been selected to illustrate how far from ordinary speech is the kind of dramatic diction which the average playgoer imagines to gain its effect by its extreme truth to life. A similar experiment with any other kind of dramatic dialogue, from Elizabethan tragedy to modern farce, would yield similar results. Many inexpert amateurs, set to speak the colloquial aridities of some modern comedies, seek to achieve dramatic effect by what they call 'putting in expression.' This exasperating device produces sometimes a style of speech resembling that of ladies afflicted with a 'party voice,' at other times the manner of an adult reading aloud to a child. Let the actress (for women are most concerned in this) who is inclined to put in 'expression' pull herself up before it is too late, and put in 'incision' for a change. Conventional expression is not the key of

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dramatic speech, which in a hundred different ways puts in music (where it can) and colour and significance and point and incision, and above all *surprise*, but hardly ever (except in parody) 'expression.' Those who heard Miss Athene Seyler extract superb comedy from a passage of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in *The Dover Road* (Act III) will know how 'expression' is best used on the stage.

Many amateur producers attempt to produce plays without having paid more than a passing notice to the matter of stage diction. Until their interest is aroused and they are prepared to give minute attention to its subtleties they have no hope of giving useful instruction to immature actors. Any significant line of stage dialogue can be delivered in countless ways that will lose its true effect, and often there is only one that will achieve it. The producer must never be satisfied until he has found at least a possible method of delivery, if not the one inevitable best method. It may serve to stimulate interest in this all-important matter if a few lines which present difficulty to the inexperienced are quoted from actual plays of all kinds, with some suggestion of how they can be most effectively spoken. The crucial sentence in each case is printed in italics.

### (i) FROM "HAMLET," ACT II, SCENE 2

KING. Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

QUEEN. *Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz.*

The producer who sees at a glance the correct inflexion for the Queen's line at least has the root of the matter in him. Most inexperienced actresses will speak it first as a ludicrous and exasperating echo of the King's line, and so make it merely stupid. It should, of course, be spoken as antiphonal to the King's line. It is not a perverse and meaningless reshuffling of words, but a smiling and courteous reminder that Guildenstern has not the monopoly of gentleness. The true effect is gained by placing the emphasis on Rosencrantz, but it is an emphasis of inflexion and not of weight, the voice rising on the first syllable of Rosencrantz and falling on the last two.

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### (ii) FROM "MACBETH," ACT II, SCENE 3

MACDUFF. Your royal father's murdered.

MALCOLM.

*O, by whom?*

This is an acting crux, which is often evaded by cowardly slurring (amply justified, however, as a means of escaping the laugh which awaits most attempts to say the words distinctly). The words should not be run together, but spoken as two distinct reactions. The interjection expresses shock, and the question a barbaric instinct for revenge, in keeping with the ethos of that age. (Almost the same difficulty attaches to Laertes's ejaculation "Drown'd! O, where?" in *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene 7.)

### (iii) FROM "JULIUS CÆSAR," ACT IV, SCENE 3

BRUTUS. Speak to me what thou art.

GHOST. Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

BRUTUS. Why com'st thou?

GHOST. To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.

BRUTUS. Well; then I shall see thee again?

GHOST. Ay, at Philippi.

BRUTUS. *Why, I will see thee at Philippi, then.*

This line is sometimes spoken as a feeble repetition of Brutus's preceding speech. But such a rendering disregards the change from "shall" to "will" and the implicit stage direction in the next line:

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.

It has no taint of the fear and bewilderment of the previous speeches, but is spoken in a new mood of defiant resignation, almost of challenge. Brutus is himself again and ready to face the consequences of his deed.

### (iv) FROM "THE WINSLOW BOY," BY TERENCE RATTIGAN, ACT I

ARTHUR. In this letter it says you stole a postal order. Now I don't want you to say anything till you've heard what I've got to say. If you did it you must tell me. I

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shan't be angry with you, Ronnie—provided you tell me the truth. . . . *Did you steal this postal order?*

RONNIE. No, Father, I didn't.

ARTHUR [*taking a step towards him and staring into his eyes*]. *Did you steal this postal order?*

Arthur Winslow's two questions are identical, and most inexpert actors will completely miss the true effect by speaking both with a heavy, measured utterance and making the second an irksome repetition of the first. The first question should refer back to the words "It says you stole a postal order"; it should be spoken with the inflexion suggested by such a line as "They say you stole a postal order. Did you?"—the emphasis being on 'did.' The second question should be more measured and deliberate, with the emphasis distributed, but much of it on 'steal.'

### (v) FROM "THE BARRETT'S OF WIMPOLE STREET," BY RUDOLPH BESIER, ACT IV

ELIZABETH. *You love me like that?*

BROWNING. *I love you like that.*

Although there is more than one manner in which Elizabeth Barrett can ask the question, there is only one which will enable Browning to answer it—on the stage. This is an example of a subtlety of dramatic speech which does not enter into the speech of real life. Elizabeth must so inflect her question that the answer completes it, making of the two a single musical phrase. Her voice rises on the last word to mark the question: Browning pauses after "I love you," then raises his voice on the penultimate word and lets it fall on the last. The sensitive ear will detect whether the verbal echo is musical, satisfying, and conclusive, as it should be.

### (vi) FROM "A NIGHT AT AN INN," BY LORD DUNSANY

VOICE. Meestaire Arnold Everett Scott-Fortescue, late Esquire, Able Seaman.

THE TOPP. *I did not foresee it.*

[*Exit.*

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These are the concluding words of the play. The voice of the hideous idol has called out the Toff's three companions to a horrible doom; now comes the turn of the Toff himself, the masterful, imperturbable, invincible Toff. The words have immense importance from their position; they can make the play end on many different notes, and the author maintains an Elizabethan unhelpfulness. There are countless ways in which the line can be spoken, few of which sound in the least convincing, but significance will leap out if it is said quietly, rather quickly, in self-reproach, with emphasis on "foresee" (the Toff had been so proud of his foresight). The line must be spoken before the Toff begins to move, drawn by that fatal and irresistible spell.

(vii) FROM "THE MARRYING OF ANN LEETE," BY  
H. GRANVILLE-BARKER, ACT I

ANN. I suppose I love you.

CARNABY. *No . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . no.*

Here is a difficult problem, because, the author being Dr Granville-Barker, one can assume that he also had the words echoing in his ears and that he meant just what he wrote. Most producers would give the riddle up and substitute a quick succession of three or four 'nos'—obviously not what is intended. It may be suggested tentatively that the only way for a sane character to repeat 'no' seven times is to say the first five on a descending scale, and lay strong emphasis on the last two.

(viii) FROM "SHEPPEY," BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM, ACT I

Sheppey, a barber, addresses the following remarks to a customer in the chair, to all of which the customer answers only "Yes" (or "Yes?"):

Razor all right, sir?—Very mild to-day, sir—I shouldn't be surprised if we had a bit of rain to-night, sir.—I 'ear the French 'orse won the three-thirty, sir.—Anything on, sir?—Bit of luck for you, sir.—I backed Varsity Boy myself, sir, shilling each way.—'E 'ad a pretty good chance.—You 'ave to be

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pretty smart to spot a winner every time.—It's a mug's game—backing 'orses.—That's what I say. But one must 'ave a bit of excitement. Sport of Kings, they call it.—Pity so many owners giving up.—'Ard times for all of us.

This demands considerable virtuosity on the part of the customer, but it can be done, and if it is done well it provides a subtle piece of comedy. No attempt can be made to describe the fine shades of inflexion required, but the passage provides an admirable exercise for the producer or actor to try his hand on. If the scene emerges as merely silly he will not have succeeded.

The examples quoted above have been in the nature of a digression, designed to promote an interest in finding the right vocal inflexion, in which most amateurs will depend for guidance on their producer. Anyone who finds himself uninterested in these problems of diction should consider whether play production is really his business.

The amateur producer generally must take the voices of his actors as he finds them. He has no time to give training in voice production, even if he were competent to do so. No attempt therefore will be made to deal with this subject. In the following section the purpose is to explain the various devices by which life and variety and significance are imparted to dramatic speech. The subject is treated under separate headings for the sake of clarity, though exact distinctions are impossible, and there will be considerable overlapping.

(1) Colour. The term is used both for a quality of the voice and for a property of words used in a poetic or emotional context. To take a simple illustration: the words "What have you there?" are capable of a wide diversity of colour according to their setting. They may have no colour at all: or the colour may be cheerful and expectant, sinister, foreboding, threatening, exasperated. The phrase 'fresh as a bridegroom' might have the colour of spring and youthful radiance: actually, as used by Hotspur, it has the colour of bitter contempt (for a non-belligerent

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while it speaks, and thinking in sentences, not in preconceived speeches of ten or twenty lines. It is no duty of the producer (except in desperate cases) to lay down the detailed use of eyes, facial expression, gesture, or attitude, but he must see that the end is achieved and that an illusion of spontaneity is created, without which there can be no vitality in speech.

Two tricks may be worth mentioning by which the illusion of the impact of a new thought on the mind can be created. Take the following speech from Galsworthy's *Loyalties* (Act II, Scene 2):

DANCY. I don't care a damn what people think—monkeys and cats. I never could stand their rotten menagerie.  
\* Besides, what does it matter how I act? If I bring an action and get damages—if I pound him to a jelly—it's all no good! I can't prove it. There'll be plenty of people unconvinced.

The asterisk in the above quotation is a symbol to be used frequently throughout this chapter to represent a pause of approximately one second (*i.e.*, the time during which one can say, for example, "One thousand"), in addition to the time required for taking breath. The specific device which is here to be described is only one of many which must be used to give spontaneity to such a speech as this. One of the technical methods of creating an effect on the stage is by the illusive power of contrast. For example, if an actor wishes to speak a phrase very hurriedly—too hurriedly to be conveniently audible—he can create the illusion of doing so by speaking the preceding words more slowly. In this speech, since the actor wishes to create the impression that Dancy is struck by a new thought at "besides," he can assist the impression by a finality of inflexion on the words "their rotten menagerie." Then there is a pause and a relaxation of position—he has finished all he has to say. Then comes the new thought red-hot from the mind, with the whole body braced in a new impulse of utterance: "Besides, what does it matter. . . ."

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The lines are of the sort which would repay study for the creation of spontaneity—Dancy so evidently has not the whole speech in his mind when he starts. It comes to him in spurts of thought, with different thoughts coloured by different emotions—resentment, resignation, despair. But the true effect is not created by a series of jerks: the dependence of one thought upon another is sometimes marked by an unbroken fluency. For example, "It's all no good I can't prove it" might be spoken thus, as though it had no stop at all in the middle of it. This leads on to the second trick for creating the illusion of the impact of a new thought.

An opportunity for it occurs in such a speech as the following from J. J. Bell's *Thread o' Scarlet*:

SMITH. And they found the hammer hid in Forge's tool-house wi' blood and a grey hair, or two on it. And they found three cheques belongin' to the farmer there also, but the bag o' notes and cash they never found; he must ha' hid it too safe. And 'twas proved that he was needin' money at the time. We all was, for that matter. \* Of course at the trial he denied everything; said he was sleepin' in his bed when it happened.

At the sentence beginning "And 'twas proved that he was needin' money" it is possible to suggest, not that the speech has been finished and an afterthought added (as in the method described above), but that the sentence before barely gets a chance to finish, because the next thought has been formed while it is being spoken and forces itself out, almost biting off the last words, "hid it too safe," in its urgency to be uttered. Another opportunity for suggesting a finished speech, followed by an afterthought, occurs after "We all was, for that matter."

These are but suggestions. The good actor will choose his own methods of achieving spontaneity, by a combination of voice, expression, gesture, and movement. All who saw the original production of *The Apple Cart* may recall a superb illustration. Many were aware before seeing the



play that it contained a speech by Magnus three pages in length, yet few of them realized that the speech was in progress until Sir Cedric Hardwicke had got half through it. Such is the power of an artist to create an illusion of spontaneity: most amateurs would have foreshadowed the heavy burden of the pages to come in their first few sentences.

(3) **Light and Shade.** The overlapping consequent on the choice of headings is already evident, since both vocal colour and spontaneity are factors in the attainment of light and shade. The term signifies the quality in dramatic speech by which variety is achieved, significance conveyed, and monotony avoided. It introduces variety not for its own sake merely (than which nothing could be more tiresome—thus do adults read to children), but for the sake of pointing significance. The variety is achieved by vocal contrast, but the contrast is not made haphazard—it is designed to do for human speech what visible contrasts of light and shade do for sculpture in relief.

Light and shade in speech is secured by *nuances* of inflexion, tone, and pitch, by emphasis and under-emphasis, by changes of pace, and by the use of pauses. The last two points are discussed in later sections of this chapter. For the rest, it can only be said that an actor who does not know how to secure light and shade cannot learn from the written word. Oral demonstration is the only possible way, and the amateur producer should be in a position to give it. It can also be heard in any professional theatre. But hearing is not enough. The producer who wishes to master this technical mystery should study carefully some part in a play, deciding exactly how he would speak it and reading it aloud: he should then hear the same part rendered by some master-craftsman such as Leslie Banks or Michael Redgrave. The contrast with his own rendering will surprise him. He will find that no consecutive sentences are spoken with the same vocal inflexion, that the rise and fall of the voice never allow the ear to tire or the mind to sleep, that a sentence is rarely spoken throughout with the same speed and

emphasis, that the pause is used more than he ever dreamed of, especially in emotional passages, and that the actor is constantly introducing the element of surprise into lines where the layman can see no opportunity for it. Above all, he will note that voice, facial expression, gesture, and movement are blended into an organic whole to convey vitality in every line. If after this experiment he has not some notion of the means of achieving light and shade he probably never will and should give up the idea of being a producer.

The absence of light and shade may be heard at its worst in an unskilled rendering of a part which contains long speeches (such as Domain in *R.U.R.* or Puff in *The Critic*, or innumerable characters in Shaw's plays), though any long part becomes almost intolerable without it. The effect produced is that of a sustained drone, which at its worst becomes maddening, and even at its best dulls the perception and reduces all to a dead level of insignificance. Few actors have voices entirely lacking in compass and flexibility of pitch, on which light and shade particularly depend, and the producer can do much with all but the most intractable material.

The 'making of points' is interwoven with the matter of light and shade, which, it may be stated again, is not an aimless pursuit of variety, but an adaptation of variety to mark significance. By 'making a point' is meant conveying to the audience the full impact of a phrase or sentence which is significant in relation to thought, situation, or character. The most obvious way of making a point is not by emphasis, as might be expected, but by contrast: the significant phrase may be said slower than what precedes, or faster, or louder, or softer, with more inflexion or with less inflexion. A significant word may be illuminated by a hesitation before it or a pause after it, by greater emphasis or by under-emphasis. The actor should approach each point with the appropriate weapon ready. He should feel, "Though the whole audience be asleep, the way I say this will wake them up, and its meaning will go home to them." But the

inexperienced actor will not even recognize what are his 'points' unless the producer tells him.

The matter of emphasis for some reason presents difficulty to the inexperienced. Amateurs (like certain B.B.C. announcers) commonly put too much emphasis on individual words, and have a perverted tendency to put it on the wrong words. There are in reality two completely different kinds of emphasis. The first is the emphasis of accent, by which the voice gives shape to a sentence by a slight raising of pitch on the key words. For example, in the sentence "I met him in a train" normally the voice would give equal value to all the words except 'train,' which would be marked by the slight raising of pitch called accent—unless it was known that the man was always travelling in trains, when the speaker would put the accent on 'met.' This kind of accentuation focuses the hearer's attention on the words providing the key to the thought. Every sentence has at least one such focal point, unless it be deliberately excluded.

The second kind of emphasis is produced not by accent but by stress. It is only used on occasion, generally to correct a misapprehension or wrong expectation on the part of the auditor. (For example:—*A.* "I met him in a train." *B.* "You met him in a drain?" *A.* "No, no. In a TRAIN.") It may help to make the distinction clear if a longer example is given. In the following passage from *The Admirable Crichton* (Act II)<sup>1</sup> the few words requiring emphasis are printed in capitals, the many accented words in italics:

LORD LOAM. I'm *sorry* for him, but I HAD to be *firm*.

LADY MARY. Oh, Father, it wasn't YOU who was *firm*. *Crichton* did it *himself*.

LORD LOAM. Bless me, so he *did*.

LADY MARY. Father, be STRONG.

LORD LOAM. You *can't mean* that my faithful *Crichton*—

LADY MARY. Yes, I *do*.

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted by permission of the late Sir James Barrie and Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd. The permission was asked and obtained for the special purpose of illustrating the use of accent and emphasis.

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TREHERNE. Lady Mary, I stake my word that Crichton is *incapable* of acting dishonourably.

LADY MARY. I know *that*; I know it as well as *you*. Don't you *see* that *that* is what makes him so *dangerous*?

TREHERNE. By Jove, I—I believe I catch your *meaning*.

CATHERINE. He is coming *back*.

LORD LOAM. Let us *all* go into the *but*, just to show him at once that it is *our* hut.

LADY MARY. Father, I *implore* you, *assert* yourself now and for ever.

LORD LOAM. I *will*.

LADY MARY. And, *please*, don't ask *him* *how* you are to do it.

It is obvious that *emphasis* must not be put on all the words in italics—which are, in the architecture of the sentence, the pillars supporting the structure of thought. The tendency among the inexperienced is either to put emphasis on words which require only accentuation, or to put the accent on the wrong word—both faults which destroy the significance of dialogue. It will almost invariably be found that when the amateur actor is corrected for using the wrong accent he falls into a new error by placing strong emphasis on a word which requires only accentuation. Here is a typical passage from a rehearsal of Bernard Shaw's *Cæsar and Cleopatra* (Act II):

CLEOPATRA. Oh, you are not *really* going to battle to be *killed*?

CÆSAR. No man goes to *battle* to be killed.

PRODUCER. You should put the accent on '*killed*,' not on '*battle*.'

CÆSAR. No man goes to *battle* to be *KILLED*.

An unintelligent actor may never get out of this way of saying the sentence. Other amateur Cæsars would repeat the sentence exactly as they had first said it, being unable to hear any difference in the producer's rendering.

Lest it be thought (as many amateurs will think) that these are trivial matters, it may be useful to examine the

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profundities evoked by a change of accent in the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth*. Generations of actresses have said:

Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much *blood* in him? [or—*so much* blood in him?]

The first variant can be ruled out as a mere absurdity (suggesting nothing but an expectation to find some other liquid predominant in old men); the second is merely commonplace, stressing the obvious fact that old men are not normally 'full-blooded.' But an actress with vision would undoubtedly say:

Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood *in* him?

What a vivid glimpse does this give us into the mind of the haunted Queen! We can see with her very eyes the horror of that lake of blood—far, far too much ever to have been contained in the frail, shrunken body. Lady Macbeth now knows—and sees that we know—how pathetically bodies are reduced in death, and especially the bodies of the old. So much for a triviality of accent.

It should be noted that deliberate under-emphasis is often a means of gaining an effect. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Act III) the end of Miss Prism's speech, which gives the clue to the troubled question of Jack Worthing's paternity, should be spoken thus (the symbols being those previously used):

In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I can NEVER forgive myself, I deposited the *manuscript* in the *bassinette* and placed the *baby* \* in the *handbag*.

If the crucial words are given the emphasis which their importance would seem to justify—or anything more than the light accents required by their antithetical force—the climax becomes laboured and obvious.

In *The Twelve-pound Look*, when for several pages Sir Harry has been trying to discover the man with whom his

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divorced wife decamped, the devastating truth is conveyed in this passage:

SIR HARRY. So who *was* he? *Out* with it.

KATE. You are *determined* to know.

SIR HARRY. Your *promise*. You gave your *word*.

KATE. If I *must*—\*\* I am *sorry* I promised.\*\*\* There was *no one*, Harry; \* *no one at all*.

The words "no one" are so important that on their merits they deserve every kind of emphasis they can be given. Yet the lack of emphasis far more effectively increases the element of surprise. If the words are given more than their normal accentuation the effect is crude.

Generally speaking, the inexperienced use emphasis clumsily and unnecessarily. The only object of emphasis is to point significance, but this can be done in many ways more artistically than by the hammer-blows of stress. In comedy particularly the amateur attempts to gain by emphasis or expression effects which the trained actor gains by incision. In this the female voice has an advantage over the male. It is impossible to describe the manner of speech referred to; oral demonstration and the school of the theatre provide the only possible instruction. Those who go to hear Miss Edith Evans, say, or Miss Athene Seyler, with their critical perceptions awake may discover one of the secrets of the technique of comedy, and they may learn how seldom the true comic actress makes her points by expression or by emphasis, and how often by biting them, as it were, with the cutting edge of an incisive voice. And round every corner surprise is lying in wait.

The manner in which under-emphasis is used for emotional purposes is dealt with later in this chapter.

(4) **Pace.** The terms 'pace' and 'tempo' are not synonymous. Tempo is the emotional timing of a scene, which may vary from the gay swiftness of farce to the lingering gloom of, say, *Riders to the Sea*. By pace is meant the rate of verbal utterance, which is only one element in tempo. It is a matter of vital importance for the making of points, the

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securing of light and shade, and the portrayal of character. The actor who is not trained to speak is at a serious disadvantage, since he cannot speak quickly without becoming inaudible, and he cannot speak slowly at all. Yet no actor is properly equipped without having a large range of pace at his command, and the producer must be prepared to give what advice on the matter he can. The first principle should be that (except in certain character parts) the actor should speak his lines "trippingly on the tongue"; he should normally go as fast as he can so as to be heard and understood in comfort. There is no reason for doing otherwise; even so he will speak much slower than in real life. The second principle is that variety of pace is one of the chief means of conveying significance and avoiding monotony.

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HORNBLOWER. Well, that won't trouble *me* much. Now, ye'd better *think it over*; ye've got *gout* and that makes ye *basty*. I tell ye *again*: I'm *not* the man to make an *enemy* of. Unless ye're *friendly*, sure as I *stand here* I'll *run the look* of your place.

[The toot of a car is heard.]

There's my *car*. I sent *Charlie* and his wife in it to buy the *Centry*. And make no *mistake*—he's got it in his *pocket*.

\* It's your *last chance*, Hillcrist. I'm not averse to you as a *man*. I think ye're the *best* of the fossils round here; at least, I think ye can do me the *most harm socially*. *Come now!*

Such variations of pace are not confined to prose dialogue: they are even more important in verse. Note the manner in which Dame Sybil Thorndike deals, in a recorded rendering, with one of Lady Macbeth's speeches (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 5). The notation of pace is the same as before:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be

What thou art promis'd: \*\* yet do I fear thy nature; \*

It is too full o' the milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,

And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou'ldst have, great Glamis,

That which cries 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it';

And that which rather thou dost fear to do

Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;

And chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round,

Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem

To have thee crown'd withal.

It will be noticed in these examples that the most important words are not necessarily spoken slowest: significance is

conveyed by contrast in speed, not merely by slackening speed. And it cannot be stated too often that by slowness is meant protracting each syllable, not interposing long intervals.

(5) **Timing and the Use of Silence.** It has been said, probably with truth, that a sense of timing is the hall-mark of a good actor. To express the faculty in another way, an actor has a sense of *timing* when he knows the value of silence on the stage. This knowledge is derived partly from intuition, partly from experience, but no one can adequately produce a play without it. In the creation of most dramatic effects silence plays nearly as important a part as speech.

It is a truism to say that many amateurs are slow on their cues. This is a deadly fault, but for a more important reason than that generally cited—that it makes a play drag. What matters even more is that slowness on cues deprives the producer and the actor of one of the chief weapons in their equipment. By constant reiterated silences (generally only a fraction of a second in length) it deprives them of the power to *make silence speak*. This point is absolutely vital. No play can come to life if silence is misused. Silence on the stage which neither is filled with significant action nor carries its own message of significance is dumb and lifeless.

Most people who attempt to produce a play will know the right way to take up a cue, with no measurable interval between the last word of one speech and the first word of another, unless the interval is significant. (It might be mentioned in passing that some producers make such a fetish of 'being on their cues' that in moments of excitement they bite off each other's words and render the dialogue impossible to follow.) They will also probably know that the lighter the mood of the play the more quickly must cues be taken, so that a rule of taking cues which might be correct in certain plays—or parts of plays—would inevitably make a farce drag (the speed at which cues are taken being an important element in tempo). But any real standard rule of experience is required for the knowledge that, while



pauses between speeches are definitely harmful except on special occasions, pauses during speeches are absolutely necessary. In any speech of considerable length pauses are an essential element in securing light and shade and spontaneity (a few examples of this have been given incidentally in this chapter). It may seem curious that the silences which are deadly between speeches should be vital in the course of a speech. The reason is that an actor when he has finished speaking has finished his thought and has no material on which to work until another speaker supplies it. If a silence follows, it is no man's child and normally becomes a dead moment; as such it is valueless, and if it be prolonged becomes definitely harmful, because it is depreciating the true value of silence. But silence during a speech belongs to the actor who is speaking; it is in his control, and he can do what he likes with it; he can make it pregnant with meaning, hinting more forcibly than words a doubt, a hesitation, a change of mood, a change of purpose, or countless other things. In any unfinished production there are countless silences of seconds and half-seconds which are merely dead moments, and not nearly enough vital silences of longer duration.

A common abuse of silence is seen on the entrance of an actor in the course of dialogue between others already on the stage. Unless there is such significance in the entry that it demands a silence, there should be no measurable interval between the new arrival's *first speech* and the speech preceding.

Silence is an invaluable aid to the making of points. For example, in A. A. Milne's *The Dover Road* (Act I):

LATIMER. But don't pretend that it is all Eustasia's fault.

LEONARD [*doubtfully*]. Well—

LATIMER. Or that it will be all Anne's fault \* *next year*.

The insertion of a pause before the significant phrase concentrates attention on its significance. Another opportunity for the effective use of silence occurs when a short sentence of a few words contains matter of critical import-

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ance. For example, in *A Bill of Divorcement* (Act I) when Sydney has just heard on the telephone of her father's escape from the asylum:

[Sydney hangs up the receiver and turns round.

MISS FAIRFIELD. Well?

SYDNEY. Father's \* got away.

The sentence is too short for its supreme significance to be easily conveyed if it is spoken fluently, though it could be spoken so if a longer pause were introduced before the sentence is started. The use of the pause for making points and marking significance (as in the last two examples) must not be overdone or it becomes merely a tiresome trick. Silence on the stage can have two distinct functions. First, it can throw into relief something which has preceded it, by recording its impact on the characters present. (For example, Kate's words "No one at all," quoted from *The Twelve-pound Look* at p. 43, would be followed by a very considerable pause before Sir Harry speaks again—"If you think you can play with me—".) Secondly, if nothing striking has preceded it begets a sense of expectation and throws its effect forward. In such cases the end of the silence must reward the expectation.

The unskilled producer who allows innumerable meaningless silences and too few of those which give life and point to speech rarely appreciates the most important silence of all—that which heightens emotional tension, the silence which *speaks*. It may be filled with movement, action, or only with palpable thought. There can be no rule about obtaining it or knowing how long it should last. Those without long experience can only learn by trial and error at rehearsal. But the producer who achieves that throbbing stillness at the end of an emotional *crescendo*, who makes the silence speak and does not find its message flashed red-hot to his brain, lacks the sensibility without which plays cannot be successfully produced.

Two examples follow of the silence which speaks. (An asterisk, as before, denotes a pause of about a second.) The

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first is from Rudolph Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (Act IV).<sup>1</sup> Mr Barrett is questioning his daughter Henrietta about her meetings with Captain Surtees Cook.

BARRETT. Do you hear me? How long have you been carrying on with this fellow?

HENRIETTA. I—I have known him a little over a year.

BARRETT. And you have been with him often?

HENRIETTA. Yes.

BARRETT. Alone?

HENRIETTA. Yes.

BARRETT. Where?

HENRIETTA. We—I—I've met him in the Park, and—and——

BARRETT. And here?

HENRIETTA. Yes.

BARRETT. Here. \* And alone? \*\*\*

[HENRIETTA is silent.]

Have you met him in this house alone?

HENRIETTA. Yes.

BARRETT. So! Furtive unchastity under my own roof—and abetted by one whom I believed to be wholly chaste and good. . . .

HENRIETTA. No—no——

ELIZABETH [*fiercely*]. How dare you, Papa!

BARRETT. Silence! \*\*\* [*To HENRIETTA, his voice hard and cold as ice*] Now attend to me. Something like this happened a year or two ago. . . .

With the cue given by Barrett's command it would be indeed a bungling producer who did not make the silence speak here. Auxiliary to the effect is the slow tempo of the first part of the inquisition. Henrietta's replies are dragged reluctantly from her, each in its little pool of silence, and she can hardly bring herself to frame the words; then comes Barrett's speech beginning "Furtive unchastity," rising in a *crescendo* of restrained passion, with the daughters' interjections coming like lightning and Barrett's command striking the very furniture into a pulsating stillness: then

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that voice again "hard and cold as ice," and, it might be added, in its first phrases quiet as death.

The second example is from Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* (Act II).<sup>1</sup> Tom Prior has discovered the truth about the ship of death, and is trying to tell his fellow-passengers. No attempt is made to mark the pauses in Prior's speech—though actually they would increase the time taken to deliver it by nearly a third—because no two actors would put them in the same place.

TOM. I began to suspect this morning before lunch. Nobody seemed to know where they were going to. I'd forgotten myself, though I didn'r admit it. I didn't want to. I didn't dare to. I daren't now. When I was quite convinced I got drunk. That was only natural. All my life I've started to face facts by getting drunk. Well—when—when I woke up again—about ao hour ago, you were all in the saloon. I was frightened, terribly frightened. At last I got out of my cabin and went over the ship. I made myself. Yes, over her, all over her. Into the officers' quarters and everything. No one said a word to me for a very simple reason. There's no one on board to say anything. No captain, no crew, no nothing.\*\*\*

MRS CLIVEDEN-BANKS. If there's no crew on board this ship, Mr Prior, may I ask who waited on me at dinner?

TOM. There's no one at all on board this ship, excepting we five—and those two—and the steward. He waited on you at dinner. He's in charge of the ship. I made myself find out. Do you know where that steward is now? He's in the rigging—sitting cross-legged—high up in the rigging. I've just seen him.\*\*\*

MRS MIDGET. It's taking him in a funny way, ain'r it?

DUKE [*advancing on TOM*]. Really, Prior, I think that——

TOM [*turning to DUKE*]. I don'r know what I'm talking about?

When the silence speaks first in this passage it is the quiet of *ecriness*, not of emotional tension. It is led up to in an entirely different way from the last. There is no *crescendo* of sound in Prior's speech. He is trying to convince his

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hearers quietly and reasonably of an appalling and incredible fact. He can even be quieter at the end of the speech than at the beginning. But the fear and horror of the unknown in the drunkard's mind must grow throughout, overwhelming his efforts to be reasonable and conveying itself irresistibly to the other passengers. When the silence ends it is broken with entirely different effect from that of Barrett. The worldly, artificial voice of Mrs Cliveden-Banks obtrudes itself with all the relentless power of contrast to quell this eerie nonsense. The second silence, however, is led up to by a *crescendo*. Prior's excitement, suppressed during his last speech, will remain suppressed no longer. It is forced out by the complacent incredulity of this maddening woman. His "I've just seen him" has behind it all the force of his desire to be believed. The silence on this occasion is ended by anticlimax, used deliberately with great technical skill. Laughter will follow, and for the moment silence has done its work. During both pauses the stillness on the stage must be absolute, with no movement more than the barely perceptible stirring of uneasy creatures seeking mutual support.

The two examples of pregnant silence quoted show the secret of its successful use. The pause must be prepared by what leads up to it, or it must be justified by what follows; or it may (and frequently does) satisfy both of these conditions. This applies not only to the longer pauses by which the big moments of a play are made tense, but also to the small pauses interspersing a continuous speech, where changes of tone and the like give a meaning to pauses retrospectively. Silence on the stage can awaken expectation more strongly than any words. Whatever happens, this expectation must not be disappointed. An anticlimax, unless it be used deliberately and with artistic skill (as in the *Outward Bound* scene), is disastrous. An example may be quoted from Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun got Wings* (Act II, Scene 2), to show how a silence is given meaning by yet another kind of ending. Ella is returning to her sick-bed leaving her negro husband, Jim, calmed with the

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thought that she still loves him; slowly she leaves the stage, and the long pause is ended by her darting back and the high hysterical shriek, "Yah! You dirty nigger!" The silence and its ending together make the most poignant moment in the play.

Finally it may be useful to give an illustration of silence wrongly used from an amateur performance of *The Farmer's Wife*. The passage occurs in Act I, when George Smerdon has just confided to Petronell that he has a legacy of £5000. Sibley enters, and on George's departure is told of his good fortune. Immediately after Araminta comes in with a tea-tray and lays the table, assisted by Sibley. The next sentences are:

PETRONELL. George Smerdon have got five thousand pounds under his Uncle Peter's will, Minta.

ARAMINTA. My stars! He'll be the richest man in Little Silver.

As the scene was acted, the laying of the table, which took perhaps half a minute, was done in silence, after which Petronell told the news of the legacy to Araminta in exactly the same manner as she had told it a minute earlier to Sibley. Everybody felt that silence to be wrong, but few knew why. To those who have studied the use of silence on the stage the reason was obvious: suspense was mounting every moment for no reason at all. A half-minute's silence, occupied by business so essentially dull as laying a table, must arouse a terrific sense of expectation, which in this case was flatly disappointed by the sequel. There are only two possible ways of acting this scene: either Petronell's remark to Araminta must be made without appreciable pause, the dialogue continuing while the table is being laid; or the working of Petronell's mind must be the centre of interest during the pause, and her next line must come as a culminating *tour de force*, introducing surprise to illuminate character with a sudden flash. Only a first-rank comic actress could do this successfully, and there is nothing in the text to show it is the author's intention. The path of wisdom,

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therefore, is to use the first method and not to introduce a silence when the expectation it arouses must be disappointed.

The timing of speech in comedy is perhaps even more important than in serious plays, but it is far more difficult to subject to any general rules. Although the principles of timing already mentioned still apply, pure inspiration plays a predominant part in all good comic acting. It must always be remembered that surprise is one of the chief weapons of comedy; and timing is an all-important factor in surprise. Something more is said on this subject in Chapter V (under the 'Control of Laughter'), but the timing of the good comedian is in the main an intuitional faculty and defies analysis.

(6) Emotion. In the following remarks about the treatment of emotional passages it must not be forgotten that no technical tricks alone can convey emotion—the ultimate basis of emotional speech must be the feeling which the actor puts into it. An actor, however inexperienced, can convey emotion if he can feel it, but the technical devices employed by the trained actor will make things easier for him and for the audience.

Let it never be forgotten that Shakespeare hated to hear "a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters." His hate is commonly shared, and if the "fellow" happen to be a woman who tears her passion in a protracted screaming which tortures the ear, the case is made far worse. As in all other matters of stage diction, the secret of success is variation, contrast, and surprise. The high notes of passion are made tolerable by contrast with the low, tortured utterance of anguish: the slow distillation of despair gains poignancy from the quick urgency of excitement. But it would be unwise to elaborate in detail on this subject. In an emotional scene it is a thousand times better to be a novice who can feel than a robot perfectly trained in all the tricks. Great acting, needless to say, can only be achieved by one who has both feeling and technique.

But it is worth pointing out that unskilled actors and producers often fail in an emotional scene by attempting to

charge the inflexions of ordinary speech with an intensity which they will not carry. Producer and audience alike will often blame the actor for failure in a method which should never have been attempted. There is a limit to the range of emotional emphasis: beyond that under-emphasis opens a further range which is too often unexplored. A new reserve of power is tapped when emotion is expressed in a flat, toneless utterance from which all inflexion has been purged away as by the heat of some inner fire. Outside its context this mode of speech is barely suggestive of emotion at all, but wisely used it can have striking effect. It is achieved by a toneless voice, absence of inflexion and colour, and an almost complete suppression of emphasis. Even the normal accents of the sentence may be omitted, the words proceeding on a flat, unbroken level. It is this suppression of the emphasis of ordinary speech which is the basis of the effect. It removes the words spoken from the sphere of ordinary life to some different plane where emotion is revealed stark and poignant. (It will be remembered that a similar suppression of emphasis has been mentioned as one of the devices of comedy, where the same purpose is served—the speech is removed from the plane of daily conversation. The emotional pitch of the voice, the feeling, the tempo, and the context give the comic or tragic complexion.) That fine dramatic critic, C. E. Montague, wrote in one of the essays in *Dramatic Values*:

When a tragic play comes to its height, they [*i.e.*, dramatists] will make speech abruptly elliptic—what might, to a mind coming cold to it, seem almost crazily callous, bathetic, irrelevant, but if the right heat be on you, richly expressive. . . ; expressive in making the heat of emotion consume, as it seems, its own vehicle.

The passage is written of the diction of tragic playwrights (Montague cites in illustration Macbeth's "She should have died hereafter"); but without the alteration of a syllable it can be read to apply to the manner of speech of the tragic actor which has been described above.



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This method of treating emotional speech demands a sensitive ear in the producer. Any experienced critic will notice occasions even in the professional theatre where it glaringly fails to come off, where the actor has not made it part of himself, and the conviction leaps to the mind, "There the producer speaks and not the actor"—about the worst thing that can be said of any production. The inexpert (who know nothing of the vices of producers) will react differently, as in a performance of *Macbeth* by the Oxford University Dramatic Society, when Macduff's reception of the news of the destruction of his family provoked the following audible comment: "He might show he minds a bit when his whole family's done in." Such a comment is utterly damning. The only justification of the method of portraying emotion by under-emphasis is its success, and the arbiter of success is the inexpert layman as much as the expert critic.

Under-emphasis can only be used for emotional purposes in short, disconnected sentences—in a long speech it would quickly become intolerable. The following examples from plays of different kinds illustrate its effective use.

The first is taken from *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 2, where Hamlet is talking to Horatio and others after they have seen the ghost of his father.

HORATIO. My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

HAMLET. Saw? Who?

Hamlet's double question should be prefaced by a pause, during which he turns and looks at Horatio. A dull, flat intonation will suggest a thousand times more than mere naturalistic emphasis on "Who?" The way the word is spoken should show that Hamlet knows well enough to whom Horatio refers, but he dare not give the knowledge recognition. Iron restraint invests the word with a cloak of dullness, but it is the restraint and not the dullness which strike the perception of the audience. In his next speech, "The King my father!" restraint is gone, and Hamlet almost whispers his incredulous amazement—yet not so

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incredulous either, in his present mood. The stage direction implied in Horatio's next words, "Season your admiration for a while," should prevent any mistaken attempt to treat "The King my father!" with the same flat intonation as "Saw? Who?"

The next example is from Act II of *A Bill of Divorcement*, by Clemence Dane.<sup>1</sup> Margaret is trying to tell the fearful truth to her 'husband' after his escape from a mental home.

*[There is a silence.]*

HILARY *[without expression]*. What do you expect me to do? Forgive you?

MARGARET *[stung]*. There's nothing to forgive. *[Softening]* Oh, so much, Hilary, to forgive each other; but not that.

HILARY *[more and more roughly as he loses control of himself]*. Divorce you, then? Because I'll not do that! I'll have no dirty linen washed in the courts.

MARGARET *[forced into the open]*. Hilary, I divorced you twelve months ago.

HILARY *[shouting]*. What? What? What?

MARGARET. I divorced you——

HILARY *[beside himself]*. You're mad. You couldn't do it. . . .

Margaret's speech, "I divorced you twelve months ago," which is at the very quick of the drama of the play, will gain immeasurably in effect if it is purged of emphasis by the agony with which it is spoken. Treated naturalistically, there should be heavy emphasis on "I" and "you," as Margaret is correcting Hilary's suggestion that *he* should divorce *her*. But by cutting across this natural emphasis and speaking tonelessly, slowly, with distributed emphasis, Margaret can do much more to suggest the torture which the words cost her. For the repetition "I" and "you" should be stressed, as she strives to drive home the dreadful intelligence to Hilary's unbalanced mind. (The stage directions are quoted from the text of the play, and the effect of Hilary's expressionless "What do you expect me to

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by permission of the author and Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd.

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do?" coming after a silence, will be noted.) The line from the same play quoted at p. 49—"Father's got away"—will gain in effect from a similar flat, toneless delivery.

Next, a passage from Act III of Karel Capek's *R.U.R.*<sup>1</sup> Rossum's manuscript contains the secret of the manufacture of Robots.

DOMAIN. Where has old Rossum's manuscript got to?  
Some one—has—stolen it.

DR GALL. Impossible.

HELMAN. Damnation, but that's—

BERMAN. Don't say that, for God's sake. } [*Together.*]

DOMAIN. Be quiet. Who stole it?

HELENA [*standing up*]. I did.

DOMAIN. Where did you put it?

HELENA. Harry, Harry, I'll tell you everything. Oh, for heaven's sake, forgive me.

DOMAIN. Where did you put it? Quickly.

HELENA. This morning—I burned—the two copies.

Helena's speech beginning "Harry, Harry," must be spoken quickly, with the conventional accents of emotion, but the attempt to prolong that manner into her next speech will invite disaster. The first speech provides the emotional context in which alone the flat, strangled utterance of the second can yield its true meaning. Incidentally this passage provides subject for study in the correct use of silence, though the sense of urgency must not be lost—the rebellious Robots are outside, and there is no hope if Rossum's manuscript cannot be found to buy them off.

Finally, the end of Act III, Scene 1, of R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*. Stanhope's friend Osborne has just been killed in a raid on the German trenches.

[STANHOPE is staring dumbly at the table, at OSBORNE's watch and ring. Presently he turns his haggard face towards RALEIGH, who sits with lowered head, looking at the palms of his hands. STANHOPE moves slowly across towards the doorway and pauses to look down at RALEIGH. RALEIGH looks up into STANHOPE's face and their eyes meet. When

<sup>1</sup> The extract is printed by permission of the Oxford University Press.

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STANHOPE *speaks his voice is still expressionless and dead.*

STANHOPE. Must you sit on Osborne's bed?

The dramatist's instinct has here provided the correct method in the stage directions. Without their guidance the producer might make Stanhope speak with a sudden access of nerve-racked fury. Such a manner would be possible and dramatically effective, but it would introduce a new note, and probably a false note, into the quiet, miserable tragedy of the scene's ending.

To sum up, the method of under-emphasis in emotional scenes is an invaluable resource, but it must be used with moderation and with discretion, and only when the emotional ground has been prepared—"if the right heat be on you." The actor must make it a part of himself, and if he cannot do so should be free to reject it. The producer who tries to use it lacking a sensitive ear will flounder into bathos.

From what has been said in this chapter it is hoped that the paramount importance of speech in the technique of acting will be apparent. All other branches of the actor's art are ancillary to it. Natural speech is but the suggestive basis of dramatic speech: it may be reproduced on occasion, but striking effect is most often achieved by cutting clean across normal tones and inflexions and catching the listener by surprise. Surprise, not 'expression,' is the key of artistic speech.

Little has been said in this chapter about poetic speech, because it does not lend itself easily to written instruction. In so far as verse is dramatic it is subject to the rules of all stage diction: in so far as it is poetic it is subject to higher æsthetic laws, which only a sensitive ear can appreciate and enforce. The producer of poetic plays, however, would be well advised to study H. Granville-Barker's *On Dramatic Method*. Although the author does not aim at instructing in the method of speaking verse, he gives an insight into the essential quality of dramatic poetry which all producers must find enlightening. ∴

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Finally, a word on the subject of dialect. The amateur's attempts to speak in a strange dialect are frequently condemned as futile and presumptuous, and this is perhaps the only matter in which he receives heavier strictures than he merits. It is obvious that the ability to speak correctly with an accent to which one has not been bred is very rare; and whenever strange dialects are attempted some critical know-all will be at hand to point out what every one knows—that natives would have spoken differently. It would be a pity if producers were deterred by facile criticism from attempting with non-local casts all the plays in dialect, or with dialect characters, which are worth acting. They should be bound in the choice of play by two common-sense stipulations: a dialect play should obviously not be performed by non-local actors in the district where that dialect is spoken; and the producer or some member of the cast must be proficient enough in the dialect used to be able to instruct and criticize the others. Full use should also be made of the dialect gramophone records published by the British Drama League. Nor is there any valid artistic reason why rustic characters (like the gravediggers in *Hamlet* or Corin in *As You Like It*) should not express themselves in the rather indeterminate vernacular contemptuously known as 'Loamshire'; it is, in fact, easy to defend an invented dialect which is musical and rustic in flavour as being more appropriate than Sussex accents in *Elsinore* or Somerset in the Forest of Arden. Let the producer who has dialectic ambitions go to it manfully, disregarding the scoffs of superior persons. Audiences as a whole will respond to an attempt which catches the flavour of dialect even if it misses the true vowels and the authentic inflexions.

### CHAPTER III

## MOVEMENT AND GROUPING

THE question of movement on the stage is inseparable from that of grouping, since obviously (except at the opening of a scene) grouping can only be obtained by movement, and every movement must result in a fresh grouping. The two subjects are therefore considered together. No attempt is made to deal with the very important question of *how* to move on the stage, which is outside the scope of this book. The producer should remember that stage deportment, which embraces standing, sitting, and moving, is a subject which costs professionals months of training; it is unlikely therefore that it will come naturally to the untrained amateur. He must keep his eyes open and do what he can.

Movement, after speech and silence, is the most important of the instruments by which the producer creates his effects. And yet in many amateur productions it is painfully evident that movement is not deliberately used as an instrument at all, and many of the changes of position appear to be aimless driftings inspired by the whim of the actors rather than purposive movements correlated to the general dramatic intention. It is not impossible even to-day to see examples of that curiously naïve manœuvre called the 'cross,' which figured so prominently and so meaninglessly in the stage directions of Victorian farces. Movement, like silence, provides too many opportunities of effective support to speech for it to be squandered in artless endeavours to secure mere variety of position. It is true that variety of position is of value in preventing a scene from going dead (though the need for it diminishes in proportion to the intelligence of the dialogue; plays with dialogue so dull that it cannot be kept alive without pointless shifting of positions are on the whole better left unacted); but, it must be a very unskilled producer who cannot gain a

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effect by every movement, in addition to the merely negative effect of avoiding stagnation. Movement on the stage must be dynamic—it is not merely a method of preventing the scene from becoming static. This point will be expanded later. The subject, for convenience, will be treated under headings, though, as usual, the dividing lines are indistinct, and there must be overlapping.

(1) **The Principles of Stage Movement.** The first and most important principle is that all movements should be *definite*. This is not the same as saying that all movements should have a definite objective, which would be nonsense. The purpose of many movements is to show the working of the mind—seen, perhaps, in aimlessness, restlessness, or irresolution; and when this is the case the principle applies with undiminished force—the aimlessness, restlessness, or irresolution shown in the mind must be *definite*. This paradoxical precept amounts to an insistence that no actor should change his position on the stage without knowing what significance his movement is intended to convey and seeing that he conveys it.

The second principle is this: Every stage movement is otiose, inartistic, and generally undesirable which does not fall under one of the following headings: (i) Utility movements designed to bring the characters into the required spatial relationships or to secure the desired grouping; (ii) movements necessitated by dramatic action; (iii) movements related to speech, or expressive of character or mood.

This classification of movements will be explained later. But first let the third principle of movement be stated: Every stage movement must be incidentally a utility movement, since it must culminate in the correct spatial relationships and a desirable grouping.

The fourth and last principle is: No stage movement must be *only* a utility movement, but must be at the same time one of those described in the headings (ii) and (iii).

(i) *Utility Movements.* In a skilful production the inexpert layman will not be able to detect any movements of this class, in spite of the fact that utility must be the determinant

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factor in all movements. Every change of position will seem to be actuated by some other impulse than the desire to make the correct stage picture. Since no movement should be only for utility, what must be said further on the subject will be said in the section on grouping. As a matter of procedure, it will be found most convenient to decide first the grouping of characters which is required at different points in the play: the producer who knows the methods of relating movement to speech, character, and mood will have no difficulty in getting his characters where he wants them, and he will make the necessary movements vehicles of significance in the process. This method is more likely to lead to good grouping than the reverse process—letting the movements take command and trying to patch up a satisfactory picture from the resulting positions.

In this connexion a word might be said on the elaborate stage directions which many modern acting editions include. The amateur producer normally has to deal with a smaller stage and a simpler setting than are envisaged by the writer of the directions. He should therefore make them his servant and not his master. It is only the most tiresome and unresourceful producers who toil laboriously in the wake of stage directions unsuited to their own conditions.

(ii) *Movements necessitated by Dramatic Action.* These present less difficulty than movements of the third kind, since dramatic actions, from shaking hands or delivering a letter to executing a murder, must be very badly bungled if they fail to convey a certain significance. It must not be thought, however, that even the simplest action will be performed by the inexperienced so that its full significance (or perhaps lack of significance) is made clear to the audience. There are many different ways of shaking hands, all wrong in any particular case except one; and there are unlimited possibilities of misdirection in the delivery or acceptance of a letter. Most amateurs will not even perform these simple actions twice consecutively in the same way. The problem of creating a special effect by action is dealt with further in Chapter VI, but it is worth mentioning here the



importance of two points in any significant action—timing and preparation. The two are closely related—the timing is determined by the amount of preparation necessary if the movement is to gain its full effect. Generally speaking, those actions require more preparation which are more important or quicker, or more difficult for the audience to follow. The meaning of preparation in this context can be illustrated from the silent film. Some will remember that in the old-fashioned comic films, which invariably ended in a chase, before a new character joined in the pursuit there was always a moment when he stood stock-still, looked with surprise at the runaway, shaded his eyes, pointed, gesticulated, adopted the pose of a runner, and finally raced off at top speed. So was his intention made clear to the audience beyond a shadow of doubt. This invariable procedure, though somewhat lacking in *finesse*, yet had in it the kernel of a true dramatic technique. It will frequently be necessary before a significant action on the stage for the audience to see, perhaps only for a fraction of a second, the actor's intention forming in his mind before he moves. When an important action for some unaccountable reason fails to appear important it will often be found that the trouble lies in the omission of this fleeting moment of preparation. Two simple illustrations may be taken from one scene in *Hamlet*, in the Queen's closet (Act III, Scene 4). When Polonius is speaking to the Queen, and Hamlet calls from within, "Mother, mother, mother," if Polonius omits the preparation for his movement to hide behind the arras the action will appear ineffective and unconvincing. The correct preparation is for Polonius to stand suddenly still and look quickly towards the voice, and make no movement until the Queen says, "Withdraw. I hear him coming." He should previously have pointed to his hiding-place on the words, "I'll silence me e'en here." The second illustration comes a few lines later. When Hamlet's demeanour has alarmed the Queen and Polonius, and the latter calls "Help!" from behind the arras, the omission of the correct preparation by Hamlet will entirely destroy the effect of what

follows. He must start upright in surprise and for a moment stand absolutely still, looking at the arras, before drawing his sword with the words, "How now! a rat?" and moving quickly towards it. This may appear extremely obvious, and to experienced actors (from whose ranks most Hamlets are drawn) it will be. They will do it instinctively, but those who lack a sense of the stage will inevitably omit the preparation, and not all amateur producers, although they would see that something was wrong, could put their finger on the trouble.

Two further examples of all-important movements which will inevitably fail without the correct timing and preparation (the King's exit during the play scene in *Hamlet* and the departure of the two lovers in *The Circle*) are given in Chapter VI, though in these episodes a third important factor is brought to notice.

A sense of economy in movement, enabling the actor to secure large effects in little space, only comes with considerable experience. The novice cannot move restlessly without perambulating the stage, nor walk angrily without making it a walking race. In a passage like that in *As You Like It* (Act V, Scene 1) where Touchstone advances menacingly on William throughout a speech of several lines ("Therefore, you clown, abandon," etc.), Touchstone's advance and William's retreat will tend to vanish in the wings long before the speech is over. Yet with due economy and correct timing threatening advance and bewildered recoil can be effected in two or three yards.

Two particular kinds of stage movement deserve special mention—fights and embraces. Of fights with swords or rapiers it can only be said that if the producer has no expert knowledge of the matter he must procure the best advice he can and not be satisfied with a mere clashing of cutlery. Fights without weapons are easier, but they must be thoroughly drilled. It is not always recognized that physical effort is not in any way necessary in the roughest of stage 'rough houses.' Intense effort can be simulated without any expenditure of force. No fight which is a real

physical struggle can possibly remain under control, and without control there is no security for furniture or—more important—scenery, and no certainty even that the fight will end in the correct part of the stage. When straight lefts, face-slappings, and such rough dealings are afoot, the comic device of a synchronized noise off-stage should not be despised; properly used, with a correct reaction from the victim, the illusion is perfect. When a kill or a knock-out results the humane producer will see that his actor knows how to fall. If he does not know the trick and cannot get an expert demonstration he should try himself to follow these instructions. The stage fall is strictly not a fall but a controlled collapse. The weight of the body is distributed, being taken first on the knees, then (with a sideways turn) on the thigh, the hip, and finally the arm and shoulder. The body is relaxed and the whole movement is fluid—in fact, the more fluid, the less painful.

The difficulty of stage embraces is not now so acute as it was in a less emancipated age, but amateurs still tend to defer proper rehearsal till the last possible moment. This tendency should receive no encouragement; the only hope of removing self-consciousness and embarrassment is constant repetition. Any stage embrace, so far from being (as is often thought) easy enough once you make up your mind to it, requires the most careful thought and experiment. As with other difficult matters, it is best to get the details worked out in private rehearsals *à trois*. When the producer has secured that the bodies of the participants are not separated by a foot or so of space he will have made notable progress. It then only remains to eradicate the delusion that a kiss can be simulated without actual contact, and that a kiss on the neck or ear can be made to look passionate by careful masking—and he will be approaching his goal.

(iii) *Movements related to Speech, or expressing Character or Mood.* Movements of this kind, which are not dictated by the action of the play, are one of the chief tests of 'finish' in production. Since they are generally unessential, different producers will vary widely in their planning of them. But

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if they are made on the wrong principles—that is, if they are not truly related to speech or truly expressive of character or mood—they will infallibly be distracting rather than helpful, and destroy rather than accentuate significance. Many of the illustrations given may seem trivial and unimportant, but it cannot be too often insisted that good production must deal with countless details which will be trivial to all but the producer and, in their cumulative effect, to the audience. The principle must always be remembered that movements should serve a double purpose—satisfactory grouping and significance. If they are dictated by a desire for variety alone they are false movements, and an important instrument for the conveying of significance is being wasted. Incidentally, the perception of the audience is being blunted: they are being made insensitive to the meaning of good movements. Once they have detected pointless or awkward movements, they are alive to the mechanism of the stage, and to that extent the power of dramatic illusion ceases to operate.

The exact meaning of relating movement to speech should first be explained. The object aimed at is to employ movement in such a way that by its inherent suitability it illustrates and reinforces the spoken word. There are, for example, some lines in dialogue which become more pointed if the actor rounds them off by sitting down: others which are illuminated if the actor rises and walks somewhere as he speaks them. In a duologue there are some lines which naturally carry one of the actors away, and others which will bring him back again. The producer who, in the pursuit of variety of position, makes his actors sit down and rise and move here and there arbitrarily is destroying the significance of movement. The following example from Noel Coward's *I'll Leave It to You* (Act III)<sup>1</sup> will show certain movements related to speech. The stage directions in square brackets are from the acting edition of the play; those in round brackets are amplifications taken from a

<sup>1</sup> This extract is printed by permission of Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., the publishers of the complete acting edition of the play.

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actual performance. Bobbie is very young, and believes, without much foundation, that he is in love with Faith, who has just turned him down.

FAITH. If you're going to be rude I shall go away.

[*She sits in chair by chesterfield.*] (*Actually on the chesterfield.*)

BOBBIE (*he is standing some yards away*). Do you really care for me so little that you can give me up at a moment's notice like that?

FAITH. You won't understand, Bobbie—I had to.

BOBBIE (*standing quite still*). Why?

FAITH. Because Mother made me promise.

BOBBIE [*up to her*]. (*He moves, stops, and then speaks.*) What did she make you promise?

FAITH. She made me promise that—that——

BOBBIE (*quite still*). Well?

FAITH. Well, you see I'm an only child, and Mother wants me to be happy above all things.

BOBBIE (*sinking quickly on the chesterfield as he speaks and leaning towards her*). I could make you happy—wonderfully happy.

FAITH. Mother doesn't think so. You see, I've always been used to having money and comforts and things.

BOBBIE (*ceasing to lean towards her, rather chilled*). Do you imagine I shouldn't have been able to give you all the comforts you wanted whether I had Uncle's money or not? Why, in a year or so I shall be making hundreds and hundreds. (*Then he rises and strides away in manly determination, transported by the glorious vision of his future.*) I mean to be successful—nothing will stop me. (*He listens to FAITH's next remark with his back to her.*)

FAITH. Well, Bobbie, if you come to me again then, perhaps Mother would——

BOBBIE (*flashing round as he interrupts her*). You mean that I'm to go on working for my happiness on the off-chance of your being free to accept me? Neither you nor your mother have enough trust in me to believe that I shall make a big name for myself. (*Then he strides up to the window in disgust and wrath, speaking as he walks.*) Good God, it was a pretty thought of your parents to call you Faith. (*He has reached the window, and*

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*turns only his head for the next shaft.)* I suppose if you had a couple of sisters you'd call them Hope and Charity. *(He turns and looks out of the window, and his back shows he is glowering.)*

FAITH *(who does NOT screw her head round to look at him, but speaks towards the audience).* It's no use being angry and beastly about it. One must use a little common sense.

BOBBIE *(striding down to her, still wrathful, and speaking as he moves).* It isn't a question of common sense, but of common decency.

FAITH *(turning to him).* How dare you say that?

Then the stage directions detail a friendly approach by Faith and the storm is momentarily quelled.

Every movement described in the scene above, if not essential, is dynamic, and therefore conducive to the full interpretation of the scene and the characters. It must not be thought that the directions given are a model for the normal *amount* of movement required in a scene of this length. Any such suggestion would be misleading. The directions illustrate only how movement is related to speech. The amount of movement is dictated by Bobbie's youthful and mercurial temperament and his mood of outraged sensibility. Inferior amateur performances on the whole have too much movement: certainly they have too much that is meaningless and related to nothing except the furniture available. The better the dialogue of a play and the better the acting, the less need is there for any except absolutely essential movements. Perhaps this explains the prominence of 'crossing' in Victorian drama: it may well have been felt that, with the dialogue which prevailed, the most pointless movement would provide a welcome diversion.

In Bobbie's movements detailed above the quality of definiteness should be noted. Only on one occasion has he a definite objective, when he sits by Faith on the sofa, but every movement, if properly executed, portrays a definite emotion. He rises from the sofa to give ampler expression to his desire to conquer the world; he moves up

to the window because he must go somewhere and show his distaste for Faith by turning his back on her; he returns to her side in the urgency of bringing home to her the vulgarity of her attitude. (This speech, "It isn't a question of common sense," might be spoken sulkily at the window, but the subsequent business requires that Bobbie shall be close to Faith, so the line must be spoken with wrathful impetuosity to suit the necessary movement.)

Mood and speech are so interrelated that they can hardly be separated. In the foregoing illustration it will be seen that some of the movements are not only related to speech, but expressive of mood. The connexion of mood with movement is too obvious to need further illustration: passion, urgency, anxiety, restlessness, indecision, aimlessness, must all have their peculiar significant movements. All must be definite in the sense that they convey a definite mood, and not merely a desire to reach another piece of furniture for support.

Character and mood, as regards movement, are hardly more separable than speech and mood. It must be obvious that some facets of character and some types of personality can be more easily illustrated in movement than at rest, and the point needs no elaboration. Movement which gives illumination to character where it is needed is dynamic and performs a real function.

It may be worth mentioning a few further points of detail which can assist in keeping movement vital and dynamic. Reference has already been made to lines which have some inherent appropriateness to the actions of sitting down or getting up or moving away. It should be remembered that movement may be dynamic when it is related not to an actor's own speech, but to the speech of another actor. Many occasions arise when a line spoken will cause the listener to express his reaction in movement.

Movements are often dictated by an objective implicit in the words spoken. For instance, in Ian Hay's *Tilly of Bloomsbury* (Act I) the following line and stage direction occur in the acting edition:

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DICKY. A sterling young fellow, Perce. [*Looks at watch—rises and strides up stage.*] I wonder where he is, by the way.

'Striding up stage' is exactly what the inexperienced actor will do at this point, conveying nothing except a blind devotion to the stage directions. But if the object of the striding is made plain, as the stage direction obviously intends—*i.e.*, to look out of the window or, in the prescribed setting of this play, through the opening leading into the hall—the movement becomes vital. It will be found in practice that, when an inexperienced player has been induced thus to suit the action to the word, as rehearsals proceed he will tend to slur the movement more and more until any meaning which originally attached to it has been lost. In this, as in many other matters, the producer will find that to get things clear-cut and definite is one thing, to keep them so throughout rehearsals quite another. The average amateur who lacks a sense of the stage has no knowledge of the meaning of definition. He has no instinct which tells him when inessential movements are significant and when they are pointless, and he will slur everything which he considers unimportant on every possible occasion.

Movement well used is of the greatest value in giving spontaneity to speech. Its commonest use is in helping to suggest finality on the completion of a thought: then the sudden arrest of the movement, combined with a quick turn of the speaker, cannot fail to produce the illusion of a new thought born that instant in the mind. The movement which suggests finality will probably be started as the sentence draws to its end; sometimes it will be checked as the sentence ends, with the new thought spoken instantly on the turn; sometimes the movement will be prolonged over an ensuing pause. Such a device might be used in the following speech from *The Farmer's Wife* (Act I):

ASH [*putting gun under his arm*]. Bah! It makes me wild to see the men after the women. Poor things, the best of you, compared to us—sly, shift and full of craft. But we be



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open and honest and straight, and say what we think, and mean what we say. \* The difference between a man and a woman's the difference between a dog and a cat, Araminta.

In actual performance Churdles Asb might turn at the point marked by an asterisk to collect his cleaning materials; then, checking himself, turn back to Araminta with another shaft plucked from his well-filled quiver. The impersonation of Churdles Ash, that pottering philosopher, gives countless opportunities for gaining spontaneity by such movement and arrest of movement. Another illustration may be given from the same act of the same play.

SWEETLAND. You'll soon wish your cake was dough 'again if you take that man. I know him and you don't. His place is mortgaged to the hilt. \* And one more thing: never you let this day's work go no farther.

Sweetland is talking to Mrs Windeatt, who has just rejected his confident offer of marriage. He is badly put out. At the point indicated by the asterisk he might turn from her in sullen triumph, only to turn back with a new impetus as he thinks of the further injunction he is to give her.

Neither spontaneity nor emotion nor character will be achieved by the actor who speaks only with his voice and not with his face, his hands, his body, and his *feet*. Whenever they move the feet must be made to talk.

Sir John Martin-Harvey claimed that if you set a man to play a part behind a curtain raised nine inches from the ground he would tell in a moment whether he could act. Few amateurs would survive such a test. The meaningless small movements of the feet in which they indulge are harmful not only because they are irritating and restless, but also—and this is far more important—because they destroy the significance of purposeful small movements related to speech, character, or mood. A step forward or back, a turn of the body, a hesitant advance, a movement begun and instantly checked—these are the small reactions which have no chance of conveying significance in a production where restless shifting and drifting prevail. But,

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skilfully used, they are an invaluable factor in giving life to speech.

A fault in the execution of movement commonly occurs when, of two players in a scene, one moves away from the other. The inexperienced actor will move away a few steps, then turn, and probably complete his walk with a step backward, which must always be *gauche* and unconvincing. He should, if possible, when he has moved away defer turning to the other actor until he has to speak again, unless the other actor first makes a remark so significant that it demands a quick turn in response. An example of such a move is detailed above in the scene from *I'll Leave It to You*.

A fault similar to that just described occurs when two actors enter speaking to each other (as happens constantly at the beginning of scenes in Shakespeare). If the actor who is speaking comes in first (as he will if he be of higher social standing) he will display an inevitable tendency to walk in with a crab-like motion, trying to watch his companion behind him as he speaks. There is not the slightest need for him to look at the other actor at all on such an occasion until he has come to rest and can do so conveniently. In general, inexperienced actors show a perverse craving to follow the person addressed with parrot-like twistings of the neck, and so give a strained and muddled appearance to what would be natural and effective grouping if they merely spoke towards the audience until their companion returns to a more convenient place to be looked at. An example of this also occurs in the scene from *I'll Leave It to You*, when Bobbie is behind Faith at the window.

When characters have been separated on the stage an opportunity for relating speech to movement with peculiar force occurs when they are brought together again. This can be done in three different ways. Let it be assumed that B is seated and A is standing at the other side of the stage. A could cross back to B while B is speaking—which might be an appropriate timing if his movement were intended to convey a threat or an appeal. Or A might move back to B

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right. I thought from your trying to kiss me you had given up being so particular.

SERGIUS [*turning from her and striking his forehead as he comes back into the garden from the gateway*]. Devil! Devil!

Sergius is a theatrical, posturing young man, and this movement, definitely related to Louka's speech, also illuminates his character. The two have now been separated. Note how they are brought together again.

LOUKA. Ha, ha! I expect one of the six of you is very like me, sir, though I *am* only Miss Raina's maid.

[*She goes back to her work at the table, taking no further notice of him.*]

SERGIUS [*speaking to himself*]. Which of the six is the real man? That's the question that torments me. One of them is a hero, another a buffoon, another a humbug, another perhaps a bit of a blackguard. [*He pauses and looks furtively at LOUKA as he adds with deep bitterness:*] And one, at least, is a coward—jealous like all cowards. [*He goes to the table.*]  
Louka.

LOUKA. Yes?

SERGIUS. Who is my rival?

Sergius's move back to the table is made in silence. He stops before he speaks, and there is a new note in the word "Louka." Thus is the effect of impending significance created and a new impulse given to the dialogue.

It will be evident from this typical extract that the producer of Shaw's plays need waste no time on devising significant movement—all that has been done for him. But he will find plenty to exercise him in interpreting the significance of speech.

Let it be said once more, in concluding this section, that the apparent trivialities in which it deals are of critical importance. It is from such trivialities that 'finish' emerges.

(2) Entrances and Exits. These offer many opportunities for the destruction of dramatic illusion through awkwardness and mistiming. Amateurs often have little

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while he himself was speaking, as Bobbie does when he returns from the window, so conveying an impression of urgency. Or, finally, A might cross to B during a silence, stop, and then speak. This last is a timing of movement which suggests deep impending significance. If the occasion for it arose it would be worth separating the two actors previously merely in order to gain this effect in bringing them together again.

An example of such a manoeuvre may be quoted from *Arms and the Man* (Act II),<sup>1</sup> with the stage directions incorporated by the author. Bernard Shaw was a man of the theatre, who wrote his plays (or so it would seem) with his characters in motion, and did not merely add the stage directions after the words were completed. For this reason his plays repay the most careful study from the novice who wants to know how in practice to relate movement to speech, character, or mood. The following extracts are continuous, but they are interrupted by explanatory comments. Sergius, the romantic cavalry officer, is trying to flirt with the maid Louka.

LOUKA [*avoiding him*]. No: I don't want your kisses. Gentlefolk are all alike: you making love to me behind Miss Raina's back, and she doing the same behind yours.

SERGIUS [*recoiling a step*]. Louka!

It might be noted in passing that the inexperienced actor, in 'recoiling,' will step back with one foot and leave the other where it was, probably with the toe pointed skywards! Both feet, of course, should be moved back, but one not so far as the other.

LOUKA. It shows how little you really care.

SERGIUS [*dropping his familiarity and speaking with freezing politeness*]. If our conversation is to continue, Louka, you will please remember that a gentleman does not discuss the conduct of the lady he is engaged to with her maid.

LOUKA. It's so hard to know what a gentleman considers

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<sup>1</sup> By permission of the author and Messrs Constable and Co., Ltd.

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opportunity for rehearsing with the actual scenery to be used, and the inexperienced producer will assume that at least every one knows how to open and shut a door. There is little to justify such an assumption. These things come naturally to actors who possess a sense of the stage, but not to the others, who by their clumsiness in the necessary change of hands or in some other way will draw attention to a movement which is absolutely without significance and so should be unnoticed. All who have seen amateur performances will remember as causes of tittering the door which is expected to open outward but perversely opens inward. Even curtained entrances have their pitfalls, and the producer who knows his business will not take them for granted without rehearsal.

The commonest failing with entrances is mistiming. This has been referred to previously, but correct timing is so important for the attainment of smoothness and finish that the right method may be stated once more. Unless there is such significance in the entry of a character that it demands a silence, the entry should be so timed that the first speech of the new arrival, or the first speech addressed to him, should follow without measurable interval after the last speech in progress before his entry. There must be a complete excision of the dead moment which comes when the new arrival is opening and shutting the door, or advancing towards the characters already on the stage. From this it follows that the cue for entrance is rarely that shown in the written text, but a line or so previous to it.

It is worth restating the well-known principle that a new character on his first entry should lift the play and give it a fresh impulse. Every such entry in every play presents a separate problem. But the producer must be aware that he has at his disposal this psychological weapon of a new interest, which may be a very powerful weapon when the character concerned has personality, and he should make it answer the need of the moment.

The occasion of an entry frequently gives an opportunity to mark the relative authority of persons on the stage. A

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the important characters on the stage should be so spaced that they can be seen not merely by some of the audience some of the time, but by *all the audience all the time*. For a truly successful performance dead spots in the auditorium must be eliminated as surely as dead moments in the play.

(5) **Crowd Scenes.** This subject may be dealt with here, though the handling of crowds demands much from the producer besides ability to group; it is in fact one of the most exacting tests of stagecraft. In a crowd scene many of the normal difficulties of the amateur are intensified—lack of stage space, shortage of time for rehearsal, and unskilful (if not reluctant) supers. Every scene where the stage is thronged presents different problems, but it may be useful to consider a scene where a crowd is addressed by speakers (such as the Forum scene in *Julius Caesar* or Act II, Scene 2 of Galsworthy's *Strife*). The first step is to plan the general grouping. Normally it is best to make the axis of the scene diagonal, so that the speakers are three-quarter face to the audience, and the crowd are so placed that they can turn to the audience without awkwardness when the need arises. Speakers must be raised above the crowd, and other variations in level will give increased flexibility to the grouping. Great care should be taken with the placing of individuals. Good crowd-playing is a difficult art: the actor must strike a nice balance between being a dummy and being so much alive that he attracts undue notice. The best crowd players should be most in evidence; the dummies will do little harm in the background, where they can pick up their cues from those in front. Constant direction will be needed to prevent the actors from getting into lines running from front to back of the stage, which both diminishes their numbers and destroys the picture: they will have to be told repeatedly to stand so that *they can see the audience* if they turn that way. Three things must be impressed on each member of the crowd: (i) he must be a living character, (ii) he must know what is his attitude to the speaker at each moment of the speech, (iii) he must know his cues for interjections and general reactions. In most

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scenes of this kind there are intervals during which the crowd exchanges comments on the speaker and his words. At such times every effort should be made, by slight variations of position, to change the focus of the crowd unobtrusively from the platform to the audience. A certain amount of movement should be introduced, so long as it does not occur while the crowd is held, or impair the stage picture. It is helpful to make the crowd act together in little teams of three or four. That all-important matter, the vocal side of crowd acting, is dealt with in Chapter V (p. 102). In conclusion, the handling of crowds is a severe test for the authority of the producer. If he does not keep full control he is lost. He must win the confidence of the crowd, and their goodwill. If he can inspire enthusiasm without sacrifice of discretion he will be well on the way to success.



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incubus, and to use what expedients may offer themselves to mitigate the evil.

The method of learning the correct use of the hands by observation of professional acting presents almost insuperable difficulties, since the inevitable experience of the most earnest student will be that, after going to a play with the firm intention of watching hands, he returns having noticed hardly anything. The most that will be brought away will be a vivid recollection of isolated gestures, a clear perception of any faulty use of the hands which may have been made, and blank ignorance as to what use has been made of them for 90 per cent. of the play. So does art conceal art. The actor uses his hands in the same way as the conjurer. We remember the rabbit which emerges from the hat, not the hand which extracts it.

The novice who is conscious of his hands never feels any sense of security until he is doing something definite with them, whereas definiteness is not a quality required of objects in repose. The definite posture chosen is generally either unsightly or inappropriate, and therefore concentrates notice where it is least wanted. The male actor's first resource is his pockets, and an attitude results which is always unsightly and generally inappropriate. Although on rare occasions the use of one or both pockets may illuminate character, it would be a wise young actor who would deny his hands this haven of refuge until he no longer feels he needs it. He might profitably take a similar vow of abnegation with regard to the backs of chairs. A heavy tax on cigarettes smoked on the stage would be valuable to the cause of dramatic art. Very few are smoked in the interests of significance, very many to give a worried actor a pleasing sense that for the moment he has 'something to do'—a frame of mind which clearly indicates a distorted sense of dramatic values. Even the last rigid soldier in the stage army has something to do while he is on the stage, and the actor who feels happier smoking a cigarette is probably not doing what he should, but something quite unhelpful. Some actors will even resort to such desperate expedients

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as keeping their arms folded or akimbo (a straw clutched at more often by actresses) or behind the back, or, if a belt is part of the costume, booking the thumbs resolutely into it. All of these positions have their part in depicting character or mood, but they are unsuitable for basic use. There is only one basic position for the hands (though in certain characters and in certain periods it may be rarely used), and that is hanging naturally at the side.

There is little use in advising the novice who is conscious of his hands to forget about them—'to throw them away.' It will be more helpful to suggest basic positions which can be adopted with comparative ease, though care must be taken not to encourage the development of mannerism. If the hands hang continuously at the sides they will be unexpressive, though it should be remembered that 'they have some other function than to 'hang'; even when they are at the sides the hands and the fingers are vital nerve-centres, interpreting the feeling of speech. An actor who feels a sense of awkwardness (which may be justified) in keeping his hands at his sides should remember that when he stands in profile, with only one hand visible, the position is unexceptionable. Actors of a certain build may gain ease in bending one arm and allowing the forearm to rest on the hip-bone, perhaps with the thumb resting on one of the coat-buttons, though any such posture overdone will result in an objectionable mannerism. In any position the hands and fingers must not be stiff, but nervous and responsive. The actor who is conscious of his hands when he is still will be doubly conscious of them when he is walking: if he swings them they will refuse to swing naturally, and if he holds them still they will feel rigid and lifeless. He should notice how often a trained actor crossing the stage will anticipate with his hands the action which is the goal of his movement, or suggest the emotion which actuates it—the right hand slightly raised in the incipient motion of shaking hands, both hands held nervously in front as a prelude to a gesture of appeal, or clenched as a prelude to anger, or outstretched as a prelude to welcome.

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If movement is definite, as it should be, there can rarely be a lack of a definite task for the hands in helping to interpret its significance. An actor who is incapable of natural repose for his hands should be kept sitting down as much as possible, since then his difficulty will be sensibly diminished.

The trained actress rarely allows her hands to rest at the sides when she is still, and almost never when she is moving. But in avoiding these positions she uses her hands expressively and decoratively, and does not occupy them in mere fiddling and fidgety movements. Women for obvious reasons *display* their hands far more than men; to this end their hands are more often poised or held in suspense. An inexperienced actress who does not know what to do with her hands has a good basic position for them which is rarely suitable for men—she can link them in front. This position with its countless variations depending on the height at which the hands are held, the manner in which they are clasped, and the method of using the fingers, can be adapted to suit any age, any character, and almost any emotion or mood.

In general, the actor who does not know what to do with his hands should study their position at every moment in the play, and not count on inspiration for guidance. The trained actor has no need for such study only because inspiration is for him expressed in the correct technical form. The natural appearance of his hands is due to technique, and not to the light of nature.

(2) **Significant Gesture.** The variety of gesture possible is too great to allow of more than a statement of general principles. For this purpose gesture is classified under four headings, which, as usual, overlap and are not exhaustive. The timing of all gesture is of the utmost importance, but that is a matter on which only experience can give guidance. It must either be exactly right or is hopelessly wrong. There can be no latitude and no criterion except that immediate perception of rightness which is one of the faculties going with a sense of the stage. Gestures generally should precede the words to which they are related.

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(i) *Gesture of Illustration.* This heading covers all gestures which attempt to illustrate speech. It includes (a) that class of gestures which is taught by misguided persons to small children reciting verse (as when the hand is raised to indicate the place where 'the moon hangs in the sky'), and (b) the gestures in which the action is suited to the word (as when the hand is raised in rebuttal or the arms outstretched in welcome). Illustrative gesture of the first kind is apt to be crude and obvious unless very skilfully used. Its employment depends on the style of acting demanded by the play being performed—the more realistic the play, the less will illustrative gesture be appropriate. Illustrative gesture of the second kind is inseparably interwoven with the delineation of character. The common faults of inexperienced actors in making gestures of both kinds are wrong timing, lack of breadth, stiffness, and an incorrect finish. On the timing only a sense of the stage can guide. Lack of breadth is generally due to self-consciousness, which wants to do every gesture on the least conspicuous scale and to get it over as soon as possible. Stiffness is seen both in the lack of fluency with which movements are made and especially in the uneasy tension of the fingers. It takes some amateurs a long time to learn even to extend their hands without having all the fingers rigidly pressed together. The finish of a gesture presents some difficulty. The tendency of the inexperienced is to end it hurriedly as soon as made, instead of holding it for as long as the words may require; and the right method by which the hands are to cease the gesture demands as careful attention as the right time. Obviously no rules can be made, but only one method will be inevitably right, and nearly all others utterly wrong. On the completion of a gesture the hand may fall to the side, or be lowered gently, or pass into another gesture: the inevitable method must be found by trial and error.

In plays of certain periods, and especially of the eighteenth century, gesture must be used with a breadth and floridity far beyond anything required in a modern play. The

producer who is not familiar with the manners of a more exquisite age must study them in the theatre or where else he can. He will find that the hands are always in evidence and play an important part in elegance of line. He will see how often and how gracefully they are poised. He will note the fluency of every movement, the flexibility of the wrist, the sensitive and decorative use of the fingers, the easy flourish of lace handkerchiefs and lace cuffs. He will study the "nice conduct" not only of "a clouded cane," but also of hats, fans, lorgnettes, quizzing-glasses, and snuff-boxes. He may not detect on the first occasion that a fop taking snuff goes through some dozen separate movements, all merged into one fluid process; but at least he should notice how the skilled snuff-taker, by perfect timing, uses the operation to point his lines. For the conscientious actor all this is a matter of careful study and practice, with the mirror as critic. The rough-and-ready rule for eighteenth-century acting, that the hands should never be carried below the waist-line, may prove of value if discreetly and intelligently applied.

Correct deportment in costume of all periods is a matter which receives too little attention with amateurs, who sometimes actually wear their costumes for the first time at the dress rehearsal. But the easy and sensitive use of the hands is a large part of correct deportment, and this can be practised at all rehearsals after books have been discarded.

(ii) *Emotional Gesture*. There is no value in attempting to particularize emotional gestures, which must be born in the travail of emotion truly felt. (The much-discussed question, whether actors ever feel the emotion which they simulate, will not here be entered into; if they do not actually feel it, they must at least 'get the feel of it,' and all actors will know what that means.) It will be sufficient to emphasize the absolute necessity of attuning the whole body to the emotion expressed in the voice. When an amateur attempts, while he is sitting at a table, to lean across it speaking words of emotional intensity, and his hand rests limply on the table, it will be apparent to both ear and eye that he is conveying no emotion. The limp

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hand is both a symptom that the actor has not truly got the feel of the emotion and a visible part of his failure to express it. An experienced actor could, with concentrated effort, express intense emotion in his voice and allow his hands limply to express nothing, but the anomaly would be instantly apparent. The hands and the fingers are a visible index of emotion which the producer must watch closely. Very often a novice will have his first inkling of what it means to get the feel of emotion by being made to feel it in his hands. It is because the hands are such a valuable index of feeling that the trained actor commonly gives them particular prominence in emotional scenes.

A classic example of the use of the fingers to secure emotional effect was seen in Sir Cedric Hardwicke's impersonation of Mr Barrett. In moments of stress the movement of the fingers had a strained, nervous inconsequence which suggested subtly the tangled psychological conflict within the man. The fingers have an importance in acting altogether disproportionate to their size.

A striking use of the hands for emotional purposes was made by Miss Joan Maude as Solveig in *Peer Gynt*. Throughout one whole scene (her passage with Peer in Act III, Scene 3) the actress stood in profile with her arms pendent by her sides. There was never any movement of the body or arms, but throughout the scene one hand with the fingers and wrist moved constantly in tune with the speech, and achieved a separate expressive beauty of its own. There was no relation between those slight movements and any movement seen in real life. This illustrates the power of an artist to *create* beauty and significance without borrowing either from life or from stage convention.

As a general rule it can be said that the stronger the emotion to be expressed, the more the hands must be in evidence. One might almost go farther and assert that as emotion rises the hands also rise—on the stage; so that in moments of greatest stress one or both hands are attracted to the face. But here we verge on the field of conventional gesture, which is dealt with later.

- (iii) *Gestures of Spontaneity and Emphasis.* The hands play an indispensable part in giving to speech that effect of spontaneity which the untrained actor so often fails to create. When it is remembered that the effect to be gained is that of *thinking* lines, and not reciting them, methods will occur to the mind in which the hands can assist. One of the basic devices suggested under the heading of spontaneity in Chapter II (pp. 35-38) was that of the after-thought—that is, giving the impression of finality at the end of one sentence and following it after a pause with a brand-new thought spoken as though at the moment of its conception. It will be apparent how gesture may be used to strengthen the effect required. With the cadence of the sentence which is to appear final the position of the body might be relaxed, the hand which was raised might fall to the side, or be outstretched to pick up a glass from the table, or the like; but *before the motion of relaxation is complete* it is interrupted by a new impulse, and a new vital gesture flashes out to recapture the auditor who has just been dismissed.
- Another basic device suggested for gaining spontaneity was the illusion that a new thought comes hurrying out, tripping over the heels of the last one. The illusion will be strengthened if the quickening of speech which marks the beginning of the new thought is assisted by a gesture which seems to say, "And I haven't finished with you yet—here's another point." It would be useless and even harmful to suggest definite gestures for creating the effect of spontaneity—that must be left to the individuality of the actor, with judicious advice from the producer. Imposing set gestures is the duty of neither the producer nor the text-book. The most that should be done is to indicate what at any moment the hands should *say*: the method by which they say it should come from within the consciousness of the actor.
- The importance of gesture for emphasis is obvious, and need not be elaborated. There are stock emphatic gestures—the striking of one hand in the palm of the other, the thumping of the fist on the table, and so on—which may have their uses, but the actor who is also an artist fashions

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his own weapons and does not draw from stock. The gesture which has become a cliché has all the demerits of the written cliché—it has lost the first freshness of its impact, and is incapable of conveying that surprise which is the characteristic of vital art. Here again the producer should see that the point is emphasized which needs emphasis: he may suggest particular gestures, but unless the suggestions are verified by the individual consciousness of the actor they are worthless and should be discarded. There are many ways of giving emphasis, and the very absence of gesture may on occasion give it overpoweringly. The timing of emphatic gestures, as of everything else on the stage, is of capital importance.

(iv) *Conventional Stage Gestures.* There are certain gestures which occupy a unique position in that they have no counterpart in real life, as have most of those indicated under previous headings. They have been evolved through a long period of stage tradition until they are now universally accepted as expressive of certain emotions, though they have probably never been used under the stress of real emotion except by persons influenced by the stage. An example of the kind of gesture meant may be seen in the movement of one hand to the cheek with the fingers approximately vertical and the little finger near the corner of the mouth—to signify alarm or dismay or some such emotion—or the placing of both hands with a strong inward pressure on the two cheeks—to reinforce an expression of terror or horror. Another conventional gesture, used sometimes by heroic and swashbuckling persons in costume plays, consists in raising the right hand to a position near the right ear, with the index finger pointing upward and backward—a vaguely gasconading gesture to which it is difficult to attach any definite meaning at all. A few crude symbolical gestures survive, such as tapping the nose to convey secrecy or shading the eyes to give the impression of viewing distant objects. Nose-tapping may have originated off the stage, but it certainly only survives now in mimicry of a stage trick; while eye-shading, as formalized



on the stage and screen, bears little resemblance to the gesture, occasionally used in real life, of shading the eyes in the glare of a strong sun.

Of all this class of gestures it can be said, first, that, since they are drawn from stock, they are inferior as a medium of expression to gestures which spring vitally from the actor's consciousness; secondly, that the more visibly symbolical they are, the less are they to be tolerated. No gesture could be worse than shading the eyes in a distant view, since this is stale symbolism and nothing more, but the gestures by which one or both hands are carried to the face to convey dismay or horror are expressive by loog association of ideas. Their effect is immediate and direct, even if they have no basis in life, and they suggest definite emotion as naturally as the stopping of the ears would suggest reluctance to hear. Consequently there is no reason why they should not be used by the actor who can make them a part of himself. It might be mentioned in passing that the complete novice will feel a reluctance to use them, since all self-consciousness has to be overcome before the hand can be conveyed naturally to the face in an emotional gesture.

In conclusion, it is well to insist that gesture, though based on life, is an artifice which belongs to the province of the actor and the orator. Its importance on the stage rests on the need of reinforcing facial expression by movements of body and limbs which can be perceived clearly by distant spectators in large buildings. It has a secondary value (in certain kinds of play) as an aid towards beauty of line. The English people use gesture but little in actual speech, and those races which are accustomed to reinforce speech with their hands use movements which are small and fussy and often inexpressive. In fact, they gesticulate. Gesticulation has no place on the stage, except as a means of depicting character. The needs of drama have transformed it into gesture, a thing far more ample and definite and deliberate, and a potent index of significance.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CONDUCT OF DIALOGUE

THE preceding chapters have dealt chiefly with matters concerning the individual actor. The proper conduct of dialogue is a matter for the team. Individual actors can no more make dialogue come to life by their unco-ordinated efforts than the members of an orchestra can interpret a symphony by however perfect a rendering of their separate parts. The analogy of an orchestra is vital. As in the rendering of a symphony everything depends on the conductor, so in spoken dialogue everything depends on the producer—in an amateur performance. (The limiting phrase is inserted because trained actors can make dialogue live by their sense of the stage, but in an amateur cast it can be assumed that a sense of the stage is a rare faculty.) If the dialogue of a play fails to convey its true significance the play fails. That most amateur performances fail (as they do when judged objectively) is due largely to the technical ignorance of their producers with regard to the conduct of dialogue.

Badly conducted dialogue is marked by flatness, dullness, lack of incision, and lack of contrast: points are not made, character is not illuminated, and significance is slurred. To repeat the key phrase, bad dialogue is that which the producer has not brought to life.

In the following sections an attempt is made to analyse the chief technical weaknesses which obtrude themselves in the dialogue of an inefficient performance.

(1) **The Curve of Suspense.** Here the plunge is taken into the most difficult of all problems connected with dialogue—one which presupposes an advanced standard of production. In an unskilled performance the dialogue proceeds at a flat level, only distinguished by occasional high spots made unavoidable by the action. Good dialogue

should, if the writing of the play permits (and no competent dramatist would arrange otherwise), move in a series of rhythmic curves, in which emotion and suspense rise gradually to a peak, then subside and rise to a new peak, until the climax of the play is reached. To vary the image, good dialogue may be conceived as a succession of waves, each swelling gradually to its climax, then breaking and subsiding; some of the waves are larger than others, but at last will come the 'seventh wave' which is the climax of the play. The rhythm will not be regular, but will be that higher rhythm of breaking seas and rolling hills.

The only effective way to explain more clearly what is meant is by detailed illustration. This has been attempted in the last chapter of this book, with reference to *In the Zone* (see diagram at p. 183). No more will be said here, though it may be mentioned in passing that many competent producers, who have never heard of the rhythmic curve of suspense, nevertheless achieve it by elaborate attention to detail.

(2) The 'Orchestration' of Dialogue. There are certain plays, most of them representing different kinds of '-isms,' in which sound, as distinct from words, is intended to achieve much of the emotional effect. Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* and O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* may be cited as examples, while among more realistic plays Synge's *Riders to the Sea* springs to the mind. In such pieces the dramatist has, as it were, 'orchestrated' the scenes so that they assault the emotions through the ear as well as the mind and eye. To a lesser degree every play may be regarded as seeking the same effect, and all dialogue provides opportunities for good 'orchestration.' Lest the musician cavil at the use of the word as a function of the producer (who in the analogy of the orchestra already used corresponds to the conductor) a word of explanation is necessary. Obviously it is the composer and not the conductor who orchestrates a symphony. The dramatist, however, cannot in 'straight' plays orchestrate the dialogue because he does not know what will be the instruments (the particular human

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voices) used to render it. The producer therefore, in extracting the best aural effect from spoken dialogue, combines the function of composer and conductor. By good 'orchestration' of dialogue is meant good handling of human voices regarded primarily as mere sound. The sensitive use of linked voices is one method of achieving beauty; there is no need to stress that it is also a method of producing significance—not the mere intellectual significance of points well made, but that deeper emotional significance which is one of beauty's attributes.

It is easier to give examples of bad 'orchestration' of dialogue than of good, since in any particular scene of a play the producer must adapt his methods to his instruments—the voices of his actors—and no two producers with different casts would aim at achieving the same effects. The possessor of a sensitive ear will detect the possibilities of his instruments during the course of rehearsals. He will find significance of sound achieved by mere accident, and be quick to seize on it and build it into the emotional fabric of the scene. He will develop hints into definite effects, and discard his preconceptions because the means at his disposal will not allow them to be successfully employed. But the features of bad 'orchestration' are not so elusive, and some of them can be explicitly stated.

The first thing to deserve attention is the pitch of the voices, particularly if all the players on the stage are of the same sex. Two men speaking at the same pitch produce the effect of a dolorous drone; two women doing so are an irritation to the flesh. No amount of variety in detail will counteract the cumulative vocal effect of such a scene. Though the players labour never so conscientiously to give it life, it will die in due course through the deadening effect wrought on the aural nerves of the audience. The amateur producer, handicapped as ever by the limitation of his instruments, may say that there is nothing to be done about it (though tones are infectious on the stage and indication of the fault may be all that is necessary). The resourceful mind, once it be aware of the defect, will generally find a remedy: if

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it cannot overcome this negative evil there is small hope of using sound for deliberate positive effect. The fault indicated above, like all other faults in dramatic technique, may on occasion be turned to account as a valuable device—the dolorous drone and the irritation to the flesh may be exactly what the scene needs for its true interpretation. It cannot be too often repeated that all rules of stagecraft are made to be broken, provided it be with deliberate artistic purpose: none can be broken in ignorance with impunity.

Such is the crucial importance of the correct use of silence on the stage that no apology is needed for returning to the subject in this connexion. It has already been stated that the unwanted silence, be it measured only in fractions of a second, makes a play drag by the interposition of dead moments and destroys the possibility of using silence effectively. It has a third disadvantage, of which no lay member of an audience would be aware, though all would unconsciously react to its influence. If stage dialogue be regarded as 'orchestrated' speech the unwanted silence is equivalent to a momentary breakdown of the orchestra. Dialogue which is slow on cues through mere inefficiency is musically on a level with the gramophone record played through with a tiresome child removing the sound-box momentarily at short intervals.

These two glaring defects—unintentional sameness of tone and abuse of silence—by no means exhaust the possibilities of faulty 'orchestration,' but it is not practicable to deal with all the false notes and missed opportunities which may occur in the performance of a single play. Let the producer keep his ear awake and he will find ample occasion for *reinforcing emotional effect* by the power of mere sound, by contrast in pitch and tone (when the grating breaks in on the smooth, or the level tone of sanity on the high-pitched and excitable), by contrast in speed (when the slow and measured provides a foil to the swift and passionate), and the like. Pure sound plays a vital part in tempo and in the rhythmic curves of suspense in which a play

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should move and develop, and it is one of the most important instruments in the creation of atmosphere. The advent of the broadcast play has given a new means of studying this subject: in that medium the 'orchestration' of speech-music becomes not merely an artistic aid to significance, but its chief vehicle. The student of production will perhaps gain more enlightenment on this matter by listening in to a play in a language he does not understand than in any other way.

The matter is illustrated in the analysis of *In the Zone* in Chapter X, and a further example is given in the description of the play scene from *Hamlet* in Chapter VI (pp. 126-129). Other illustrations may be quoted. In J. J. Bell's *Thread o' Scarlet* the whole effect of the climax of the play depends on the preparation afforded by Butters's speeches—not on their sense, but on their purely vocal effect. The voice of Butters, in both its emotional and its dreamy passages, must be a voice from another world than that of the mundane, ordinary occupants of the inn parlour, with their mundane, ordinary reactions to the excitements of that night. Only correct use of Butters's voice in the 'orchestration' of the previous scene can enable Breen to carry off his last entry.

In W. W. Jacobs's *The Monkey's Paw* the horror of the last passage, after the knock at the door has come in response to the second wish (for the return of the dead son), depends not on the words uttered, but on the treatment of the voices of the two parents, combined with the *crescendo* of knocking on the door. The scene, well played, might be performed to an English audience in Chinese, and they would miss none of its horror.

In Lord Dunsany's *The Gods of the Mountains* the entry of the Gods at the end of the play can only be made effective by the correct 'orchestration' of the preceding moments. The Frightened Man (his entry has already been referred to in another connexion at p. 78) gives the keynote of mysterious fear by the vocal quality of his speeches, but the seal of inevitable doom is laid upon the beggars by Ulf's chanting cry beginning, "I have a fear, an old fear and a

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boding." The words have the poetic quality by which sense is identified with sound, but the sound alone, properly handled, should be enough to create the shiver down the spine which must precede the entry of the Gods.

All these examples are taken from tragedy or 'drama,' because they provide more obvious illustrations. The treatment of speech-music is equally important in comedy for its true effect to be gained.

The correct 'orchestration' of crowd noises is of vital importance, and this applies not only to definite crowd scenes, but to all moments when large numbers on the stage interpose their general hubbub—as, for example, in the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (Act V, Scene 1), when Hamlet and Laertes are fighting in the grave. Bad 'orchestration' in such a case means flatness and anticlimax. The words to be dealt with in the graveyard scene are as follows:

HAMLET. . . . Yet have I something in me dangerous,  
Which let thy wiseness fear. Hold off thy hand!

KING. Pluck them asunder.

QUEEN. Hamlet! Hamlet!

ALL. Gentlemen——

HORATIO. Good my lord, be quiet.

[*The ATTENDANTS part them, and they come out of the grave.*]

HAMLET. Why, I will fight with him upon this theme  
Until my eyelids will no longer wag.

The King's urgent command and the Queen's cry of agitation, following so close on it as to be almost overlapping, let loose the shocked and remonstrant chorus of the attendants, as, released from their embarrassed survey of indecorous behaviour in high places, they surge round the grave. (Needless to say, each attendant does not cry "Gentlemen" once and then cease, but there is a confused clamour, from which the word emerges repeatedly.) Horatio's appeal is synchronous with the cry of the attendants. It will be drowned, though Horatio's actions should convey its import; on no account must it be spoken as a separate audible speech, or the scene will suddenly cease to

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live. The confused clamour, reaching its apex quickly and falling quickly away, is only silenced by Hamlet's passionate cry, "I will fight with him upon this theme," rising above it and subduing it. A brief moment of this kind requires very elaborate rehearsal, though few of the participants will understand why. A silence of even a fraction of a second anywhere between Hamlet's "Hold off thy hand" and his next speech will shatter it—the orchestra will have broken down.

A somewhat similar problem may be quoted from *The Admirable Crichton*.<sup>1</sup> Lord Loam has been presumed drowned in the wreck, and Ernest has just announced the approach of a tiger-cat.

ERNEST. The grass is moving. It's coming.

*[It comes. But it is no tiger-cat; it is LORD LOAM crawling on his hands and knees. . . . The girls see him, and with glad cries rush into his arms.]*

LADY MARY. Father.

LORD LOAM. Mary—Catherine—Agatha. Oh dear, my dears, my dears, oh dear!

LADY MARY. Darling.

AGATHA. Sweetest.

CATHERINE. Love.

TREHERNE. Glad to see you, sir.

ERNEST. Uncle, uncle, dear old uncle.

*[For a time such happy cries fill the air. . . .]*

The clue to this incident is given in the last stage direction—it is the sound which matters, not the words spoken. Strict adherence to the words will invite anticlimax. There must be first expectant fear, then silent suspense, then a hubbub of joyful reunion, in which there should be no instant of silence till Treherne has subdued the noise with his next remark, "Ernest thought you were a tiger-cat." Until the sounds of a small scene like this can be handled to perfection the producer would be well advised to shun the complexities

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted by permission of the late Sir James Barrie and Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd. The permission was asked and obtained for the special purpose of illustrating the correct treatment of such scenes.



of, say, the first act of *The Constant Nymph*, or most of the episodes in *Miracle at Verdun*, which depend almost entirely on 'orchestration.'

In scenes such as those in *Strife* and *Julius Caesar*, where a crowd is addressed by speakers, the secret of success is that the noise of the crowd must continue without any audible period of silence, unless the silence is under control of the orator. Every effort should be made to induce the crowd to be articulate, and to speak actual words appropriate to their emotions and their characters. This will not be easy to effect because all stage crowds prefer to moan lugubriously whatever their supposed emotions—and the result sounds not (as they hope) like many voices speaking, but like a lugubrious moan. Incidentally the crowd *must* learn its cues—in fact, it must know the whole speech of the orator almost as well as the orator himself. There should be a continuous murmuring background from which the written speeches of the crowd emerge—a murmuring with an elaborately arranged *crescendo* and *diminuendo*. The orator when he speaks must subdue this murmuring by shouting it down, unless he has first quelled it by a gesture or an attitude. Moments of silence in a crowd scene are deeply significant, but it cannot be too much emphasized that the silence must be under the control of a personality or interpreting a real psychological impulse in the crowd—not the mere negation of sound caused by orchestral breakdown. A single dead moment in a scene of few characters is damaging: in a crowd scene it is disastrous. In any episode where a confused background of voices is required definite words must be supplied if they are not given in the text. 'Gagging' in the interests of good 'orchestration' is not only legitimate, but indispensable.

(3) **The Listener's Part.** The notorious weakness of many amateur actors—that they cease acting when they cease speaking—is a matter in which the producer is primarily to blame. No actor can keep the stage alive by the power of his words unless he has the co-operation of every person on it. The passive unhelpfulness or active

misbehaviour of characters who are not speaking is one of the commonest causes of a scene's failure to come to life. The producer alone can see the whole stage picture, and if he does not see what is wrong with the listeners no one else will. It will do no harm to repeat the well-worn but often disregarded maxim, "Hear everything when you are on the stage as though it were for the first time." The actor who acts in intelligent conformity with this rule when he is silent will do no wrong. A few other rather obvious but all-important principles may be restated. No actor can support the dead weight of an inattentive listener. The speaker who appears to be interesting his stage listeners will have gone more than half-way towards interesting his audience, and the same truth applies to other emotions besides interest which the speaker appears to inspire on the stage. The best way to show interest in what is said on the stage is to stand still and watch the speaker—except on those occasions when the correct reaction is to move about and look away from the speaker. (How often is the producer asked, "What can I do all the time X is making that long speech?" The answer should on all normal occasions be the same: "Keep entirely still and LISTEN, and show that every word he utters is striking something inside your brain.") It takes a long time for the untrained actor to realize that when he is not speaking he is not being closely watched, but, at the same time, by his interest he is breathing life into the scene, or by his indifference emitting an invisible deathly miasma. An actor who cannot listen *in character* is an exposed impostor. A listener who plays his own game and distracts attention from the speaker should be referred to Hamlet's comment on his kind (in his instructions to the Players in Act II, Scene 2), and if he gives any further trouble warned off the stage for good.

These principles apply generally to the passive function of the listener (if any part of acting can be called passive). His more important function in helping to convey significance is dealt with in the next section.

(4) The Give-and-take of Dialogue. Under this

heading is treated one of the commonest forms of weak production. In the proper conduct of dialogue acting and reacting are complementary. It takes at least two players interacting simultaneously to convey its full significance—not (as many amateurs seem to think) two players acting alternately. The true effect can only be secured by minute attention to detail, directed by technical knowledge and a sense of the stage. It may convey some idea of the weakness referred to if dramatic dialogue is conceived as a game of ball. In the good production thrower and catcher are alert and active continuously, watching and anticipating when they are not throwing or catching; in the bad production there is no catching, but one player takes the ball, tosses it in the air, and then puts it down for another to take up. To put the matter in another way, dialogue should be a matter of give-and-take: in the bad production it is all give and no take.

It is impossible to do more than suggest a few of the minutiae of technique by which an actor when he is not speaking contributes to the life of dialogue. Facial expression, gesture, and movement all play their appropriate part. The impact of every word of his interlocutor must be seen in the listener, expressed in terms of the character he is impersonating. The correct emotional reaction to each new idea must be read in every line of his body. If the dialogue is, as often, a duel of personalities, we must see one actor thinking out the riposte while the other speaks; we must see the retort framed in his eyes before it is ever framed on his lips. He will perhaps shape to utter the retort, only to have the unspoken utterance deferred by a new sentence of his opponent. In every speech the actors should be not only playing their individual characters, but engaged in a collective act of creation—the representation of the interplay of character.

Reference has been made in previous chapters to the 'making of points' by devices at the disposal of the actor who is speaking, but few 'points' are made without the collaboration of a listener, and some are made by the reaction

of the listener entirely. (In the same way the listener often contributes as much as the speaker to the gaining of laughs—a matter dealt with further in the next section.) It may be worth mentioning two tricks which are invaluable to an actor for marking the significance of a sentence spoken by another.

The first is the sudden cessation of some movement on the part of the listener. The movement, which will have been especially devised and timed for this very purpose, may be large or small—a change of position on the stage, lifting a glass to the lips, such business as arranging flowers or dusting chairs, or some studied piece of inattention to the speaker such as turning the pages of a book. The sudden interruption of any business, followed perhaps by a slight turn of the head and a momentary stillness, is an infallible method of showing the impact of significance. The stillness throws into high relief the remark which has preceded it and that which follows. This device can be used with varying degrees of emphasis for large and small matters. The producer who does not use it is denying himself one of the most important technical aids in the proper conduct of dialogue.

An elaboration of this trick is occasionally useful when there are several persons on the stage and it is desired to mark emphatically the significant impact of a remark on one of them only. The procedure then is for the actor affected not merely to interrupt a movement (which might go unnoticed on a crowded stage), but to draw attention to himself by a clearly audible sound. The practice appears most commonly in those detective dramas which depend for their interest on a miraculous draught of red herrings—when the butler inexplicably greets an innocent remark by breaking a plate, or some personage hitherto above suspicion concentrates sudden attention on himself by allowing his teacup to fall into the saucer. It was used more artistically in Komisarjevsky's production of *Macbeth*, at the moment when Duncan nominated Malcolm Prince of Cumberland. Macbeth had been at one side, writing in a

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field message book; as the (to him) ominous words were spoken he tore out the sheet with a sudden sharp sound which immediately focused the attention of the audience on his reaction to the appointment.

The second trick is a sudden turn of the head by the listener towards the speaker. (The turning of the head away from the speaker is also a useful device, but this is a more subtle reaction and less obvious in its effect.) The quick turn of the head cannot fail to catch the attention of the audience, and is an unmistakable index of significance. An opportunity for it (from *Hamlet*) has already been quoted at p. 56.

It is relevant here to deal with a question which often vexes the amateur actor—whether in speaking he should look at the person addressed or towards the audience. As a general rule he should, of course, look at the person addressed—at his eyes, and not some other part of his body. But, apart from the exceptions mentioned at p. 73, it is obvious that a persistent profile may become tiresome, and some lines (if, for example, they are reflective or charged with dramatic irony) are better spoken to the front. In this, as in other matters, the producer, like the billiard-player, must think some strokes ahead. He will make an actor speak a line facing the audience especially so that he may mark the significance of the next speech by a quick turn of the head. Conversely he will have a line spoken face to face so that the listener may mark his reaction to the reply by turning his head away. In the timing of such reactions there is no latitude. It is either just right or all wrong.

By attention to such minute details as this the give-and-take of dialogue is secured. Movement is another all-important factor, but this has been previously dealt with in Chapter III, Section 1 (iii). It must be remembered, however, that no mere changing of positions will bring dialogue to life; it is the timing, manner, and significance of the movements which give the vital spark.

No apology is necessary for another reference to the crucial importance of speed on cues for keeping dialogue

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alive. It cannot survive a succession of dead moments, though pauses which would be dead moments in the bustle of farce would not be such necessarily in a play or scene of slower tempo. Only a sensitive producer can tell whether a silence is dead or alive, since on one occasion half a second's pause may be dead and on another five seconds' pause may be throbbingly alive. But it is worth mentioning that any silence which could be measured even by a stop-watch is dead after an interrupted speech, and no amount of repetition at rehearsal is wasted if it secures that interruption is instantaneous.

This section cannot be better concluded than by an extract from an article on production written by Bernard Shaw. He is speaking of persons telling the producer what is wrong with a scene which for some reason misses its effect.

If they say that a scene is too slow (meaning that it bores them) the remedy in nine cases out of ten is for the actors to go slower and bring out the meaning better by contrasts of tone and speed.

Wise words indeed! The producer who understands this paradoxical counsel and can put it to good use knows the secret of keeping dialogue alive.

(5) **The Control of Laughter.** The question of laughter on the part of the audience is most fittingly dealt with in this chapter. It is one of the most difficult matters in production. Laughter in the theatre is largely unpredictable and defies analysis. It varies with different audiences, with different times of the day, and with different days of the week. Amateurs are at a serious disadvantage in this, as in other matters, because they can rarely profit by the experience of a run. Every company learns on its first night things it little suspected about the laughability of its performance. The professional company can make changes if the reception demands them, but for amateurs the first night is too often also the last.

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The subject can best be treated under two headings—inopportune and opportune laughter.

(i) *Inopportune Laughter*. This is put first because it is the more important. The unwanted laugh means at best a loss of dramatic illusion, at worst a breaking of emotional tension, and must be eliminated at all costs. Fortunately it is more easily predictable than laughter of the other kind, but nevertheless it is not unknown for professional producers to be caught napping on a first night. In old plays many of the pitfalls are known in advance. Montano in *Othello* (Act II, Scene 1) must have many anxious moments before he is safely over his exclamation, "Let's to the sea-side, ho!" Laertes's "Drown'd! O, where?" and Malcolm's "O, by whom?" (referred to at pp. 30-31) are well-known pitfalls. The producer who has not given careful thought to the noise off in *Macbeth* which produces the question, "What is that noise?", and the answer, "It is the cry of women, my good lord," deserves what he gets. In a recent professional performance of a modern play, Lord Dunsany's *A Night at an Inn*, the yowl of each of the seamen as he met a ghastly death off-stage was greeted with hearty laughter—an unpardonable and by no means inevitable lapse.

Many producers who have taken no steps to guard against inopportune laughter solace themselves when it occurs by blaming the insensibility of the audience. But the insensibility is more often their own. The producer must watch unceasingly for inopportune comedy or bathos, and eliminate them (if he can do so in no other way) by ruthless cutting. It is kinder to the author to cut a line or a phrase which the players are incapable of rendering than to subject him to untimely laughter. It is also kinder to the players.

Laughter, however, is not necessarily incongruous in a pathetic or emotional scene. Amateurs are often deeply and quite unjustifiably distressed when it cuts into genuine feeling well portrayed. The test of congruity is whether the audience is reacting sympathetically to the situation and emotions of the persons in the play, or unsympathetically

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(though not necessarily unkindly) to the *gaucherie* of the actors who impersonate them; whether, in fact, the laughter is inside or outside the orbit of dramatic illusion. Laughter is a frequent companion of tears in the theatre, as in other places.

The amateur who plays to unsophisticated audiences has a special problem in the hysterical shriek of the village maiden which inevitably occurs in any scene where the emotional ground has been well and truly prepared. No method of dealing with this pest has yet been discovered, and it will remain one of the tribulations which the amateur suffers in the cause of art.

(ii) *Opportune Laughter.* In comedy or farce the producer can never anticipate all the points which will win laughter. But he should be clear on the points which, if they do not secure a laugh, will have failed to convey their full significance. Amateurs habitually miss many laughs, and nearly always a missed laugh means a point not made.

It should be fairly obvious that a comedy played without responsive laughter from the audience is a failure. The whole cast should work for this response, and, provided they use only appropriate methods and do not scavenge for cheap or irrelevant laughter, they can hardly have too much of it. There need be no fear that excessive laughter will hold up the speed of a play to its detriment. It does not have that effect. The slickness of the slickest performance of farce will in no way be lost even if laughter should double the acting time of certain episodes (and this unquestionable fact proves conclusively that it is static moments caused by absence of sound which make a play drag: 'held' moments filled by sound from the audience have no such effect). Paradoxically enough, a farce performed with slick competence will probably take longer to play than with the ordinary amateur lack of speed and finish.

The producer with an inexperienced cast in comedy or farce has before all else to kill the charade spirit in which most of them will face their task. The charade 'gets across' (in so far as it ever does) by reason of abundant



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high spirits on the part of the actors, and infinite goodwill on the part of the audience. On the stage high spirits, unless supported by competent technique, can only reduce an audience to despair. It is impossible to describe the subtle devices by which the mastery of laughter is achieved. Like everything else in acting, it is done by minute attention to detail. The student of comedy has much to learn from the best low comedians, who have attained the perfection of technique by which laughter can be commanded absolutely at will. The amateur producer, before he can get the novice to turn his attention to detail, will have plenty to do to crush the idea that ebullience and buffoonery and broad, obvious strokes are enough.

The lines of comedy which command laughter can be divided into two kinds—those in which wit or humour lies openly on the surface and those in which the comic significance is latent. The first kind requires mere assurance and audibility to get across. (It is worth noting how often, when an apparently foolproof line fails to score a laugh, the reason is simply that somehow or other part of it has not been heard; the resources of fools are greatly underestimated.) The second kind demands the technique of the comic artist, and in this, as so often in other forms of art, the secret of success is *surprise*. But where the sudden revelation of comic significance in character or situation is concerned we leave the earthly domain of rules and principles and rise to the celestial sphere of inspiration. What laughter-provoking quality is there in the lines from *Twelfth Night*:

SIR TOBY. Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?

SIR ANDREW. I have no exquisite reason for 't, but I have reason good enough.

Very little, to the ordinary actor. And yet Mr Miles Malleon convulsed the house with Sir Andrew's line. The bright flash of utter ineptitude which went with the words brought that shattering joyful surprise which only the artist can convey. Another example from the same

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play shows how the true comedian can get a roar of laughter where the inexpert would detect no comic possibilities. Sir Toby Belch, instigating his companions to riot, says:

But shall we make the welkin dance indeed? shall we rouse the night owl in a catch that will draw three souls out of one weaver? shall we do that?

As usual, it was by surprise that Mr Roy Byford worked a miracle with the last four words. His rendering of them revealed Sir Toby in a gleam of sudden light as nothing but a mischievous schoolboy, suggesting a 'rag' which was bound to cause unfavourable reactions, and not quite sure if he dared.

A few points about the command of laughter deserve the consideration of the producer. The subtler points of comedy sometimes require time to penetrate to the audience, and the producer must allow for this time lag in his arrangement of what follows, recognizing that if the laughter does not come the subtlety has been lost. Here is an example from Barrie's *Dear Brutus* (Act III):

JOANNA. It is lovely not to be married to you, Jack.

PURDIE. I can understand that. I do feel small.

JOANNA. You will soon swell up again.

PURDIE. That is the appalling thing. . . .

In three consecutive amateur performances Joanna's delightful shaft won not a titter, and the point was obviously thrown away. The reason was, first, that Purdie followed with a quick cue and the audience did not get there in time. But there was a second technical error: Purdie's failure to register a hit by his expression was an even more important cause of the audience's failure. A laugh is often scored not by the speaker, but by the listener, by means of an appropriate and well-timed reaction. On the other hand, when a comic point is subtle, but is developed in the next sentence, it may be right to tone down the first point and speed over it so that it does not secure a laugh. An illustration occurs in Mr John van Druten's *London Wall*

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Marlow's with speed and incision, to secure the laugh where it truly belongs, after the culminating speech.

On the whole question of gaining laughs the producer must be prepared to give what help he can, because the inexperienced actor will be all at sea. But he will find that the 'charadist,' with his rough-and-ready methods, is not much interested in these technicalities of comedy.

What to do with a laugh when it has been gained is a further question. The novice ordinarily talks straight through it. The ability to wait without embarrassment for the laugh to end is an indication of a dawning sense of the stage. As far as a rule can be given, the correct procedure during a laugh is to hold the position until the sound subsides (though there must be many departures from this). The skilled actor can not only start a laugh, but end it when he wishes. If it is very prolonged it is best not to wait till absolute silence is restored, but to raise the voice enough to dominate the sound and so continue the dialogue. Laughter should never be allowed to get out of hand. When it becomes general and sporadic, spreading itself over a whole passage instead of being concentrated on definite points, it is a danger to the play, and the actors must get it under control and localize it as soon as possible. Some professional actors gag through a long laugh—a mistaken procedure, since it gives the audience the impression that they are missing some of the dialogue. It is a sign that an actor knows what he is about on the stage if, having started a line at a moment when it is completely drowned by an unexpected laugh, so that the audience cannot have heard a syllable of it, he makes a fresh start as soon as he can be heard; but considerable experience is necessary before an amateur actor is sufficiently master of the situation to do this. In general, the amateur producer should know that he must constantly tell his company not to talk through the laughs, and that many of them will nevertheless constantly persist in doing so.

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as a means of overcoming an awkwardness. A is talking to B at the window; shortly afterwards he has to make a confidential remark to C, who is standing by the fireplace, before resuming his conversation with B. How is this to be done? Without fuller knowledge of the circumstances it is impossible to say, but this is the sort of occasion from which a resourceful producer will often secure not merely avoidance of awkwardness, but brilliant point. Individual actors should be encouraged to think of their own business, and warned that it will not be accepted if the producer does not like it. No play has yet been produced beyond the possibility of improvement, and constant inventive thought will always be rewarded by opportunity.

It was stated on the previous page that good business "must be inherent in the play." Mr Lennox Robinson in his book *Curtain Up* gives an admirable example of what an actor can do with a play when the author is not looking. The incident came at the end of a serious piece at the Abbey Theatre, when the hero, a 'broth of a boy,' is about to reform his ways and go to America. By a sudden act of self-sacrifice his widowed mother decides to sell her farm and go with him—which act should bring the play to a moving close.

But Philip Guity—a beautiful actor—playing the part of the ne'er-do-well, gave one look at his lugubrious mother, a look of despair, a trapped look, a punctured look, and that look made the play end in a gale of laughter.

Mr Robinson says that it thereafter became a successful comedy. Perhaps the author was pleased after all. What the producer thought is not mentioned.

The following piece of business in a modern comedy was both inspired and inherent in the play. It occurred in *March Hares*, by H. W. Gribble, produced in London by Mr Nicholas Hannen. During a temperamental squabble between two youthful lovers one of them pettishly flings a pack of cards in the air, so that they scatter over the room. The disputants pursue the quarrel on their hands and knees picking the cards up.

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The timing of business often needs the most elaborate experiment and rehearsal. Even trained actors who may time their lines to perfection often fail badly in the timing of business until they have been drilled. The amateur is commonly content with business so slurred and mistimed that it loses all point; he has no instinctive feeling of rightness in this matter, and sees no need for the repetition necessary at rehearsal. It has not been unknown for an actor to ask in the course of the dress rehearsal, "Will it be all right for me to smoke a cigarette in the next scene?" Such ignorance of the possibilities in smoking a cigarette if properly rehearsed, and the risk of doing it unrehearsed, is almost incredible, but it can be reckoned on as normal with inexperienced actors. Smoking a cigarette, however, is relatively simple; when it comes to business which must be both clear and unobtrusive the difficulties of timing begin to mount. In one of the Aldwych farces (where perfectly timed business abounded) three characters, A, B, and C, were standing close together in that order. B, while talking to C, had to extract a cigarette-case from the breast-pocket of the latter's coat, and pass the booty to A, who put it in his own pocket. The perfect timing required so that the operation shall be at once quick (much of its humour lies in its expert speed) yet clear to the audience, and unnoticed by C, makes it an admirable exercise for those anxious to explore the niceties of timing.

It is worth making the general observations that a good piece of comic business is habitually overdone by the inexperienced, and that no business can be good which distracts attention from dialogue proceeding simultaneously. As Hamlet says, "That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it."

(2) **Business in Old Plays.** In plays of a certain date the text will be found to include as a direction the unpromising word 'bus.,' but as these plays are mostly museum pieces, not grown in the vintage years of drama, they are best left unacted. In older plays where the stage

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directions are confined to a bare minimum of essential actions the producer is faced with the creative task of filling in the outline and doing what some professional producer has done for the modern play. Provided he interprets correctly the mood of the play and the intention of the author, his hands are free. Many producers in dealing with an old play are content to arrange the entrances, exits, and positions, and leave the actors to get on with it. But the author is entitled to more expert co-operation than that. There is no reason to suppose that old plays were originally presented with less elaborate business than modern ones. The texts of Elizabethan dramatists certainly abound with hints of business which would be given detailed stage directions if the plays were printed in the modern manner. Sir Toby Belch's indelicate "a plague o' these pickle-herring" comes to mind, and here is another example, more obvious than many, from *As You Like It* (Act V, Scene 4):

JAQUES. How did you find the quarrel on the seventh cause?

TOUCHSTONE. Upon a lie seven times removed:—bear your body more seeming, Audrey:—as thus, sir. . . .

It may be presumed also that the actors did not confine themselves to business which is hinted at in the lines. The producer, then, should appreciate that the authors of old plays counted on the assistance of an expert man of the theatre, whose technical knowledge and fertility of invention would translate the written word into living drama. His opportunity, especially in comedy, is unlimited, and he should not hesitate to take full advantage of it. Much of the business in Shakespeare is already shaped by stage tradition (for example, the method by which the foils are exchanged in the fencing match in *Hamlet*), but no producer need worry because he is ignorant of it. He has the opportunity of taxing his imagination and improving on stage tradition.

It may be useful to give a few illustrations of business in

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old plays which has served to enliven action and add significance to situation.

In *She Stoops to Conquer* as produced by Sir Nigel Playfair a brilliant touch was added in the interview between young Marlow and Miss Hardcastle in Act II. Marlow, fiddling with a chair in his profound embarrassment, got one of his fingers caught in the carved back and became inextricably attached to it. With an unskilful actor this situation might become tiresome, but Mr Ivan Samson, by his unobtrusive efforts to free himself without betraying his predicament to Miss Hardcastle, made it as perfect and appropriate a piece of comic business as could well be devised. It should be noted that there is no intrinsic importance in the dialogue of this scene, and if attention was sometimes distracted from the lines no harm was done. The significance of the scene lies in the situation and interplay of character, and not in the dialogue.

Of the countless pieces of business which must occur in Shakespeare's scenes of broad comedy one may be quoted from Max Reinhardt's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Oxford. In the play performed by the clowns Thisbe, on the words "Come, trusty sword," discovered that this important property was not to hand. The word was passed back by Quince and taken up in hoarse whispers, "Sword, sword," by the clowns in the background, who could be seen scurrying to and fro—Lion, Wall, and the rest—in frantic search. Then the remedy occurred to Thisbe, who removed Pyramus's sword from his breast, waving it aloft in signal to the searchers off-stage that all was well. Sighs of relief from the clowns, and the tragedy went on, "Come, blade, my breast imbrue." It is by such happy touches that a producer of genius brings out the essence of comedy. Comic dialogue may date, but comic business is eternal.

An instance of the way in which a small piece of business will illuminate character with a swift, unexpected ray occurred in the first modern-dress production of *Hamlet*. The lines concerned were those of Polonius to Ophelia in Act I, Scene 3:

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I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,  
Have you so slander any moment leisure  
As to give words or talk with the lord Hamlet.

Polonius (A. Bromley-Davenport) throughout the speech ending with these lines was seated at his desk, *beaucoup affaire*, dealing with his correspondence. In the delivery of the last line there was a break after "talk" during which Polonius with a double motion drew the flap of an official envelope across his tongue. The last words, "with the lord Hamlet," were accompanied by a thump on the desk to seal the envelope. The roar of laughter produced by this business was evidence that it had in a supreme degree the quality of surprise. The implied disparagement of Hamlet was brilliant and overwhelming. No one will maintain that this kind of thing is Shakespeare, but it is undoubtedly 'Shakespeare in modern dress.'

Here is an example of good stage business from tragedy (*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 3). Macduff has arrived on the morning after the murder of Duncan, and expresses a wish to see the King:

MACBETH, I'll bring you to him.

MACDUFF. I know this is a joyful trouble to you;  
But yet 'tis one.

MACBETH. The labour we delight in physics pain.  
This is the door.

In a recent London production *Macbeth*, after the line "The labour we delight in physics pain," turned to go through the door leading to Duncan's room. But the thought of what he should see was too much for him, and he started back and, standing clear of the door, indicated the way to



action," that the incident is by no means always played as the words suggest.

A last example, of a bad piece of business, from another production of *Macbeth*, by Komisarjevsky (Act I, Scene 3). Macbeth and Banquo have been speaking to the witches, and as Macbeth, eager to get further information from them, said, "Speak, I charge you," a procession of escorted prisoners crossed the stage between him and the witches. When the prisoners had passed the witches were gone. Macbeth and Banquo had not seen them go because their sight was obscured, and the audience had not because they were watching the prisoners. But if Shakespeare had meant the disappearance to be effected like this he would not have immediately after given to Banquo the two entirely inapposite lines:

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,  
And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?

Nor would Macbeth have offered the suggestion that they had vanished into the air. This is an example of a cumbersome and over-clever piece of business quite out of keeping with the author's purpose. In his anxiety to get away from the supernatural (the witches were made into aged gipsy women) the producer had to resort to the methods of the conjurer, which have no place in serious drama.

(3) **The Making of Effects.** The failure to make an effect is a prevalent weakness in amateur production. By this is meant failure to convey the full significance of an important movement, situation, or action—the failure, that is, to get across to the audience an essentially dramatic moment. The principles in relation to effects depending on movement have been already dealt with in Chapter III (pp. 63-66), and these principles apply to effects of other kinds. Stress was laid on the importance of preparation, timing, and definition. But there are occasions when it may not be sufficient for an effect to be well prepared, clearly defined, and sustained long enough for its significance to be clearly

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perceptible; it may be defeated after all by bungling of *what immediately follows*. This point is analogous to the principle already dealt with in regard to silence—that silence is justified by its ending. Its bearing on the question of effects will be seen more clearly from the particular illustrations given in the next section.

Patient and elaborate rehearsal is necessary to ensure that the amateur's tendency to slur and to hurry on to the next thing is defeated, and the producer should pay particular attention that the effect is not only produced at one rehearsal, but maintained at every rehearsal. If he is not constantly on the watch the essential business will gradually be more and more slurred, until by the time of the first performance it has become completely meaningless. In the next section a detailed description is given of the methods used in getting over a 'big moment' at the climax of a play. These methods can be applied equally to all minor effects, variations of importance being achieved by variations of speed and emphasis.

No producer should be too proud to consult the members of his cast not on the stage. They are valuable advisers, and can criticize what passes at rehearsal in a more detached and dispassionate way than the producer himself. No technical knowledge is required to judge whether an intended effect is or is not obtained. The verdict of the cast as spectators is not lightly to be set aside, and the producer who goes against the consensus of their judgment is generally wrong.

(4) Big Moments. There can be no rule of thumb for conveying the full dramatic significance of a big moment. It can only be done with certainty by careful artistry and infinite rehearsal; it will not be done by the light of nature. Every problem is an individual one, to be solved by different methods, but the points to be remembered are preparation, timing, definition, and *what follows*.

The question can best be dealt with by examining specific problems. Let us take first the culminating moment

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Act III of *The Circle*,<sup>1</sup> by Somerset Maugham, where Elizabeth, in spite of a prolonged demonstration of the unsatisfactory life which awaits her, leaves her husband and goes off with her lover, Teddie Luton. The matter is decided for her by Teddie's speech which ends, "I don't offer you peace and happiness. I offer you unrest and anxiety. I don't offer you happiness. I offer you love." Then follows a page or so during which the last words of the departing couple are said to Lord Porteous and Lady Kitty. This is the preparation, adequately done by the author, so that there is no need to enlarge upon it. Then comes the departure—in the words of the play:

LADY KITTY. She must write a note for Arnold. I'll put it on his pincushion.

TEDDIE. Pincushion 'be blowed! Come, darling. We'll drive through the dawn and through the sunrise.

ELIZABETH [*kissing* LADY KITTY and PORTEOUS]. Good-bye—good-bye.

[*TEDDIE stretches out his hand, and she takes it. Hand in hand they go out into the night.*]

LADY KITTY. Oh, Hughie, how it all comes back to me! Will they suffer all we suffered? And have we suffered all in vain?

The unskilled producer who attempts *The Circle* will fail signally over this big moment. The departure of the lovers will be a flat anticlimax, and the play, which ends a page later, will have no time to recover from it. The producer will probably be sensitive enough to know that something is lacking, but he will be quite unable to put his finger on the cause of the trouble. He will wonder whether the stage directions are all wrong, or whether the dramatist has written an impossible play. As a matter of fact, Mr Somerset Maugham has very little to learn about the technique of play-writing, and the stage directions are right as far as they go, though they might be more helpful. It will assist the exit considerably if a last touch of preparation

<sup>1</sup> The extract is printed by permission of Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd.

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is given, and for one fleeting moment Elizabeth, after she has said good-bye, is seen to hesitate before taking Teddie's hand and going resolutely out. The departing lovers have then done all they can. But the crucial point is this, and here the stage directions are unhelpful: it is not the departing lovers who make or mar this big moment; it is the two who remain on the stage, and especially Lady Kitty, who speaks next. Timing, which has played its usual important part in the actual departure, becomes absolutely vital when the lovers have gone. The successful interpretation of this moment depends chiefly on three things—the length of silence after the exit, the behaviour of Lady Kitty and Porteous during the silence, and the manner in which Lady Kitty breaks the silence. There is no need to elaborate the matter further. The producer who, knowing the secret of success in this problem, cannot get the whole business exactly and inevitably right by trial and error at rehearsal lacks the sensitive judgment which a producer must possess.

Another 'big moment' from a modern play which will certainly fail without the most skilled production is the climax of Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* (Act III),<sup>1</sup> when Richard Dudgeon, an innocent man, awaits at the gallows the moment of his execution. The text reads as follows:

DUDGEON. Your watch is two minutes slow by the town clock, which I can see from here, General.

*[The town clock strikes the first stroke of twelve. Involuntarily the people flinch at the sound and a subdued groan breaks from them.]*

Amen! my life for the world's future.

ANDERSON *[shouting as he rushes into the market-place]*. Amen; stop the execution. *[He bursts through the line of soldiers opposite BURGOYNE and rushes panting to the gallows.]* I am Anthony Anderson, the man you want.

*[The crowd, intensely excited, listens with all its ears. JUDITH, half rising, stares at him, then lifts her hands like one whose deepest prayer has been granted.]*

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<sup>1</sup> The extract is printed by permission of the author and Messrs Constable and Co., Ltd.

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The last big moment to be described is the exit of the King during the play scene in *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene 2). In a recent production of *Hamlet* it was possible to watch the scene being built up during rehearsal from hopeless flatness to real effectiveness. The producer knew that something was still drastically wrong when the rehearsals were well advanced, but could not pick out the exact cause of failure. The situation was remedied by experimentation, to the extreme annoyance of the cast, who had been quite unaware that there was anything wrong with the first procedure. The words of the play at this point are:

HAMLET. Begin, murderer; pox! leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come: "The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge."

LUCIANUS. Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing; . . .

On wholesome life usurp immediately.

*[Pours the poison into the sleeper's ears.]*

HAMLET. He poisons him i' th' garden for's estate. His name's Gonzago: the story is extant, and writ in choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

OPHELIA. The King rises!

HAMLET. What, frightened with false fire!

QUEEN. How fares my lord?

POLONIUS. Give o'er the play.

KING. Give me some light! Away!

ALL. Lights, lights, lights!

*[Exeunt all but HAMLET and HORATIO.]*

HAMLET.

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,

The hart ungalled play;

For some must watch, while some must sleep:

So runs the world away.

The first method attempted was based on a quick interchange of the sentences from "The King rises" to "Lights, lights, lights." This was intended to create the idea of tense excitement which is generally achieved by the very

swift interplay of short sentences. As it happens, such a method at this moment involves a fatal error of timing. The interval between the rising of the King and his hurried exit is not nearly long enough for the true effect to be created, and the incident is over before its immense significance has had time to penetrate to those on the stage or to the audience. In other words, there has been insufficient preparation.

Since in the performance referred to the play scene achieved a real beauty, it might be helpful to describe in detail the steps by which the culminating moment was approached. The play was produced in fanciful modern dress, with a considerable debt to Ruritania and the Balkan States. The dress incidentally had an interesting and unforeseen effect, since it coloured the whole play with the atmosphere of a petty, intrigue-ridden European Court, showing up the immensity of black fate by contrast with the feeble ineffectiveness of these little courtlings. The modern setting allowed the full resources of lighting to be used naturally, as Shakespeare himself would certainly have used them. Even with the limited resources of his day he could not refrain from projecting on the stark daylight the darkness which strikes the King with a sudden unbearable oppression.

The scene between the Player King and the Player Queen was accompanied by a distant flute *obbligato*, which not only shed a strange and unsuspected beauty on the verse and gave a detached remoteness to the play-within-the-play, but also created a new value for silence when it ceased. The fluting continues after the exit of the Player Queen during the dialogue from "Madam, how like you this play?" to "Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung." Then, at the entry of the murderer Lucianus, it fades away, and simultaneously the lights are dimmed till nothing is clearly seen except the prostrate form of the Player King and the murderer, lit by a spot. By the time Lucianus begins to speak his lines the background of silence has given a terrific sense of impending events. As the murderer

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starts to pour the poison in the sleeper's ear Hamlet's voice, tense with ill-concealed excitement, breaks the silence—"He poisons him i' th' garden for's estate. . . ." During this speech the King rises, dimly seen in the half-light; Ophelia draws attention to him in a surprised whisper, and Hamlet's excitement breaks out in triumphant irony, "What! frightened with false fire." The King comes down from his dais and takes a few steps to the centre of the stage, with his gaze fixed on the circle of light which encloses the murdered player. The Court meanwhile has risen nervously and watches him in amazement. Then the Queen comes to the King's side. Her anxious question, "How fares my lord?" breaks the spell which holds him. With Polonius's officious "Give o'er the play" (which may well be prompted by the re-entry of the Player Queen, as described in the Dumb Show), the King turns from the murdered man and, after a meaning glance at Hamlet, finds words in the hoarse cry, "Give me some light!" The addition "Away!" is addressed either to the Court, to the body on the stage, or to the Queen, repelling her sympathy. The word "Light" is taken up by the Court in urgent whispers, and somebody scurries to carry out the command. Then the lights go full up, and the King, after being momentarily dazed at finding himself the central figure in an unpleasant scene, walks hurriedly out. The Queen follows him in anxious haste, and immediately a buzz of excited conversation breaks out, in which the players, who have come nervously on to the stage to see what is afoot, join. Polonius goes out next, taking Ophelia, and the rest of the Court follow, still talking excitedly in twos and threes. When all are gone there is a moment's silence while Hamlet and Horatio look at each other significantly. Then Hamlet breaks into his doggerel verse: as he delivers it, with all the exaggeration of his "antic" style, it is an almost hysterical song of triumph. The trick has worked!

Described thus in words, the scene may give the impression of being intolerably drawn out, but that is because it takes far longer to describe than it should to act.

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The only pause of any length is when the King comes from the daïs, but even that is only a matter of a few seconds. The all-important thing is that each action and movement should be clear-cut, definite, and in sequence, with its motive plain. If the episode from "The King rises" to his hurried exit were acted with a quick give-and-take of the short sentences it would last for about five seconds; acted in the manner described above, it would last perhaps twice as long, but the additional five seconds are absolutely vital. And it should be noted again that the making of the effect depends just as much on what happens after the King has gone out as on what happens before. The effect on the other people on the stage is what translates itself to the audience. The buzz of conversation after the Queen has left and the almost insane glee of Hamlet's doggerel are the deciding factors in the success or failure of this big moment. Throughout the scene the 'orchestration' of sound also is of vital importance. The producer, even when he knows the trick of it, should remember that a scene like this must be drilled and rehearsed until the cast, who, if they are amateurs, will have no idea why there is so much fuss about so simple a matter, are sick to death of it.

(5) **Noises Off.** A separate section is given to this subject because as a rule the importance of noises off is badly underestimated in the amateur theatre. The audience probably expects little more than crude conventions—a couple of forlorn shouts for the roar of a crowd and a toot for the arrival of a car—and this is all the producer bothers to give them, but in so doing he is putting unnecessary difficulties in his own way. Because he escapes criticism for bad noises off, it does not show that he has not made a serious error. It is the producer's whole duty to get the audience where he wants them, though the audience may be quite unaware of the spell to which they are submitting. Whenever a bad noise off or any other ineptitude occurs the audience slip free from the influence of dramatic illusion. They may still remain benevolent and uncritical (such is normally the regrettable condition of amateur audiences),



but they are no longer emotionally in the power of the producer and the actors.

Crowd noises off-stage as made by amateurs are for the most part hopelessly unconvincing and damaging to the play. They rarely receive more than the barest rehearsal, and any odd-job man *is pressed into service at short notice*, with disastrous results. It should not be necessary to point out that they require just as perfect 'orchestration' as noises on the stage, and more rehearsal, because they are more difficult to co-ordinate. Admittedly there are often terrific difficulties as to personnel, but the amateur producer must be prepared to spend his life overcoming difficulties. The first essential for an off-stage crowd is a conductor—some one who knows exactly what the producer wants and co-ordinates the sound with the voices on the stage like the conductor of an orchestra. In this way there is some hope of making invisible crowd noises something more than a succession of dead moments interspersed with inhuman moans from which the words 'rhubarb' and 'cascara' dismally emerge. The necessity for a conductor applies not only to full-sized crowds, but also to groups of people seeking entrance, and the like. The placing of the supers so that the best auditory effect may be obtained is generally neglected, but repays careful experiment. Finally it should be remembered that speeches off-stage are difficult to hear and generally boring to listen to, and that cries of distress from an invisible quarter are a source of grave danger, because they almost invariably sound comic.

No attempt will be made here to go deeply into the question of mechanical noises, since many books already deal with the subject. But it may be stated that they are worth taking trouble over, and that patient research will probably enable better effects to be gained with improvised materials than with the recognized apparatus (this certainly applies to thunder). In fact, ingenuity and experiment will probably clear up all difficulties not solved by gramophone records. In a play which depends on wind it is worth having a wind machine made—a simple device within the

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compass of any amateur carpenter. Peas or semolina on wood will settle the question of rain or hail, and sandpaper on boards makes the sea (and various other sounds) a simple affair. A few supers crunching coke or gravel will conjure up the tread of marching armies. Cars of to-day rarely hoot a bulb-horn as they come to rest, and a more convincing line of approach is offered by that very distinctive sound, the bang of a car door, and perhaps in addition the swish of tyres on gravel. Finally, no producer is complete without the most valuable of all stage oddments, a press bell operated by a spring (such as is often affixed to front-doors).

## CHAPTER VII

### CHARACTERIZATION

THIS book is intended for the guidance of producers and not of actors. No attempt, therefore, is made to go deeply into the methods of depicting character on which the whole art of acting depends. Many books already deal with this subject, though it is doubtful if any can be of great value to the aspiring actor, who, apart from innate ability, can best learn from observation of life and other actors, practical instruction, and, most of all, from experience. The purpose of this chapter is rather to show how production and characterization interact on each other, how the characterization affects the play, and how the producer can best influence the characterization. The amateur producer has a special problem, in so far as his cast is generally far from perfect. It often has one or two complete misfits and a few hopeless incompetents. His special problem then is to see that the integrity of the play is preserved in spite of imperfect material. From this it will be plain that his task is far more difficult than that of the professional producer, who has his pick of a trained profession. Since the amateur producer often approaches his task with very small appreciation of the difficulties and less technical equipment, it is not surprising that the results are sometimes less than perfect.

(1) **Characterization or Impersonation?** No apology is needed for reverting to this hackneyed distinction, since it holds the clue to good acting. Impersonation is akin to the art of the mimic, who is notoriously ineffective on the stage. Like mimicry, it is built on external accidents and mannerisms, and does not probe to the depths of personality. Characterization, on the other hand, is built on psychological foundations. It has its origin in thoughts, and its basis is an imagined personality,

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from which individuality of manner springs naturally. When the producer has explained this laboriously to an actor who misses his character he has done about all he can to get true characterization. He can explain in words some of the more obvious facets of the personality to be interpreted, but it is unlikely that he will convey much practical assistance thereby. His next resource must be to negative his own teaching by demonstrating some of the external accidents in which the personality expresses itself, in the hope that the actor may be able to mimic him.

This procedure is in fact not so unsatisfactory and irrational as it sounds. An insight into the psychology of character is often conveyed by a gesture, an attitude, or a method of speaking a line, when a more direct approach to personality by explanation has conveyed no light. For example, in a production of *Mr Pim Passes By* the actress playing Lady Mardeo ("a vigorous young woman of sixty odd, who always looks as if she were beagliog") got her first inkling of the feel of the character by being drilled into an appropriate carriage of shoulders, arms, and head. If an actor is hopelessly astray in his character such suggestive methods are the best that can be done, and often secure tolerable results. If the results continue to be intolerable there is nothing for it but to replace the actor. Amateur production gives quite unequalled opportunities for the exercise of tact.

The producer who can himself act any part is a dangerous possession to a company. No two actors will play a rôle identically, and for a producer to thrust his own interpretation, complete with every gesture and every inflexion, upon another actor is wrong in principle and likely to be disastrous in results. It will certainly inflict acute misery on the actor concerned, who can never get inside the skin of a part if the skin has been made for some one else. It will be useful to quote Dr H. Granville-Barker (in *On Dramatic Method*):

Much more than interpretation is required of the actor. He has to *embody* the character. Not, let us be clear, to suppress his own personality in favour of another of the

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dramatist's invention. . . . The character, as it leaves the dramatist's hands, has to be recreated in terms of the actor's personality.

If this is true (and it unquestionably is, with regard to important characters) it is evident that the producer must tread warily. His best course is, if the actor is giving a satisfactory rendering, to leave him alone; if he is not, to offer him practical hints on which he may be able to build a truer conception of the part. Suggestion is infinitely better than dictation. Most producers who cannot themselves render every character can find isolated phrases or movements which they can invest with the essentials of character as a suggestive demonstration. The producer who cannot do this cannot 'see' the part, and if he cannot see the part it is most unlikely that he can see the play in which it figures.

To sum up, it is far better for a producer to do too little than too much in the matter of characterization. Provided the rendering of a character does not defeat the purpose of the play, he had better leave well alone. There are so many other things which only he can do that he should leave as much as possible to the individuality of the actors.

(2) Attack. The term 'attack' is used theatrically in two quite different senses. First it denotes the quality which enables character to be exhibited to full effect on the stage; it is a kind of gusto composed of assurance, vitality, definition, and *vocal energy*, all raised to a power slightly higher than life. It is the theatrical dynamic which projects character over the footlights. The word is used in this sense when an actor is told that he 'needs more attack.' Deficiency in attack is the besetting sin of amateurs; it is what more than anything else divides them generically from professionals. The producer must from the outset try to infuse this quality into those of his cast who lack it.

In its second sense the word is more difficult to define. As far as the interpretation of the play is concerned it is probably more important than characterization. It may be described as the manner in which an actor impresses

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himself on the emotional substance of the play. The word is used in this sense in such criticisms as "X's attack was too boisterous," or "too sentimental," or "lacking in perception." Faulty characterization may be apparent only to those who have seen the character better portrayed, but a wrong attack may easily destroy a play's whole balance. The most difficult and unrewarding part to play is one in which a true attack in this sense depends on lack of attack in its primary sense. Such a character is Christian in Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in whom a pale ineffectiveness is the chief requisite as a foil to the romantic *panache* of Cyrano himself. The producer, as the author's trustee, must early in the course of rehearsal assure himself that the secondary attack of every actor is artistically right. If it is he can leave them to go their own way except for suggestive hints in detail; if it is not he must provide the guidance of a new inspiration.

(3) Stage Personality. The producer, before attempting to cast a play, must be aware of the overwhelming importance of stage personality. The inexperienced judgment of an average audience is completely blinded by it. It is the result of the combination of a certain inherent distinction of voice, bearing, and personal appearance, with sufficient experience of the stage to give ease of manner. No actor can be great without a good stage personality, but, on the other hand, many who possess this quality are in no sense good actors. In this fact lies the danger. It is a common experience to hear such criticisms as "A bad play, only saved by the magnificent acting of X," when, in fact, a good play has been wrecked by the predominant personality of X, who, having entirely misconceived his part, has thrown everything out of joint. (It may be remarked in passing that even some professional critics are incapable of disentangling the actor from the play and the producer from both where a new play is concerned.)

The producer must recognize, therefore, when he casts his play that its whole success is staked on the use made of the actor who possesses a dominant stage personality. Such

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an actor will be thought by the audience to be good whatever happens (unless they have previously seen his part much better performed); if he does not fit in with the purpose of the play so much the worse for the play! The difficulty of dealing with the situation is greatly increased because the actor with a good stage personality is generally far more intractable than others. Having been a popular success in many previous plays, he is reluctant to believe the producer who tells him that in this play he is utterly wrong, and since his own judgment of himself will undoubtedly be confirmed by the audience once more 'on the night,' it is highly improbable that he will ever learn any better. This kind of actor is one of the greatest problems with which an amateur producer has to deal. There is no solution of it. The producer can only try to mitigate the evil in casting, and thereafter do his best for the play with that tactful forbearance which holds the amateur theatre together.

There is, however, a valuable side to stage personality, which may be the producer's greatest stand-by. It provides him, in any ordinary cast, with one or two players who can be relied on to carry off almost any part without making a mess of it. If the possessor of a good stage presence can be induced not to do any active harm to the balance of the play he is an invaluable ally. Such players can add distinction to a scene merely by walking on. They can walk through a difficult part and escape detection if they miss every point and slur everything significant. They may not get from the part half of what it offers them, but they bring to it instead a quality which some more competent actors could not provide.

There is a third class of actor possessing a good stage personality—those who in addition are sensitive artists. But such actors, though they exist in many companies, are windfalls on which no amateur producer must depend.

(4) **Sympathy and Antipathy.** There is some validity in the routine classification of characters as sympathetic or unsympathetic, though the actor who sees no farther than this into the personality he is portraying has

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hardly got to the bottom of the matter. The dramatic characters most worth acting cannot, of course, be classified in this way. (Is Othello a sympathetic character? Or King Lear?) The distinction is primarily sentimental rather than psychological, and the good dramatist, in creating his most important characters, is influenced by considerations deeper than their tendency to inspire sympathy or antipathy.

However, the producer should bear the distinction in mind for two reasons. First (though this applies chiefly to minor characters), it is an important consideration in casting. Some actors and actresses are found who possess a natural charm on the stage, and others who do not. There is no more difficult quality to acquire by taking thought, and it is only slightly less difficult to disguise it where it exists. The producer, then, who in casting his minor characters is influenced by the natural 'charm capacity' of his actors will be smoothing his path considerably. A Horatio who is thoroughly likeable and a Rosencrantz who is thoroughly unlikeable (on the stage) will be half-way to satisfying the requirements of their rôles before they have even begun to act them. In adopting this principle in casting there will be no need for the producer to exercise his invincible tact, since no actor is aware that he lacks charm on the stage, and those who are cast for unsympathetic parts are flattered by the implied tribute to their acting ability. The majority of amateur actors, however, are neutral in the matter of charm, neither possessing nor lacking it conspicuously, while the really competent actor can assume it or dispense with it at will (though many leading professionals are labelled permanently as charmers or non-charmers, owing to personal predilection and the practice of casting to type).

The second reason why the producer must keep the sympathetic and unsympathetic distinction alive in his mind is in order to watch that the balance of a play is not destroyed by leading characters misdirecting the sympathy of the audience. This is a frequent cause of such maladroit criticisms as that quoted above: "A bad play, only saved



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by the acting of X." The danger is that an actor, owing to a selfish desire for popular approbation, will exploit his charm where he should not, or, alternatively, that by his attack he will alienate sympathy from a character which must be likeable. (To such a one the producer may well say, if he wishes to win his audience, "Let it appear in thy smiling; thy smiles become thee well." Those who lack charm on the stage either do not smile or smile unpleasantly.) But this point, though highly important, is obvious and elementary, and needs no labouring.

(5) Mannerism. There are two kinds of mannerism in acting—mannerism as a property of the actor and as a property of a fictitious character.

Of the first kind nothing good can be said. An actor who contracts some idiosyncrasy of speech, gesture, movement, or expression (some of the most deplorable are connected with eyelids and eyebrows), and applies it to his acting of entirely different rôles, is obviously forcing them all into one likeness, which is not the business of acting. A mannerism often starts with the playing of a particular part to which it is appropriate, and is then unconsciously carried on into other parts until it becomes habitual. Since the process is unconscious, the responsibility for checking it rests on the producer.

Mannerism of the other kind is often a useful aid in the delineation of character. It is essential, however, that it should fit the character to which it is applied, and not be equally appropriate for any character (like mannerisms depending on minor physical ailments). Mannerisms of this kind are often prescribed in the stage directions; for example, Borring in *Loyalties* and Octavius in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* are stammerers, and in other plays characters are labelled, for no apparent reason, as short-sighted or slightly deaf. Where such physical defects are suggested by the author it is probably best to retain them, even if they serve no very obvious purpose except to introduce some facile laughter, but otherwise they are better left alone. Another example of a mannerism prescribed by the author

is that of Dominic, the butler in *The Dover Road*, who holds one corner of his coat with thumb and finger—again a harmless pursuit, but not particularly illuminating. Tricks of gesture and of speech are more likely to throw light on character, but the producer should only introduce them deliberately as an aid to the weaker brethren who have difficulty in achieving distinctive character without them. It need hardly be said that cliché mannerisms (like other stage clichés) should be left severely alone. Little original humour remains to be extracted from, for instance, the eyeglasses of clergymen or the monocles of majors. There is still room for brilliant innovation in characteristic mannerism; for example, the laugh of Mr Henry Hewitt as the Civil Servant in Mr J. B. Priestley's *How Are They at Home?* That high-pitched, short-lived, explosive giggle, emitted from a body suddenly bent backward like a bow, was a true revelation of character, though probably nothing quite like it has ever been seen in real life. But unless genuine inspiration comes the artistic producer will regard the device without enthusiasm as a *pis aller*.

(6) *Passengers*. Few amateur companies are lucky enough to be without their quota of hopeless incompetents, who can never by any possibility be made into actors. It is in dealing with these that the amateur producer undergoes one of the most exacting tests of his skill. The emphasis laid on the importance of minor characters when a former *jeune première* is being cajoled into playing a parlour-maid is justified in more than a tactical sense. It is undoubtedly true that minor characters are only less important than major characters. They are the undistinguished buttresses of dramatic illusion, of which the leading characters are the stately pillars. One entirely unconvincing walker-on can cause the collapse of the whole structure, leaving it to be built up again from the start. Every company will have its passengers, but it is the business of the producer to see that there are no passengers in the play. It is a difficult undertaking, but it can almost invariably be done.

The correct procedure is to decide first which of the cast

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are capable of positive merit and which are not. The former will then be worked up to their highest point of achievement and the latter worked down to their lowest point of harmlessness. The producer's task with the competent is to encourage their virtues, with the incompetent to discourage their vices. When all the histrionic vices have been stripped off an actor there remains some sort of an individual who, however undistinguished and ineffective, will at least not attract undue notice. In such cases the whole character must be toned down to its lowest possible level and, as far as the play allows, transformed to fit the personality of the actor. He must not be asked to do anything which he cannot do convincingly. Lines which he cannot get over will, if possible, be cut or given to some one else: business or movements which expose his weakness must be adapted to his scope. Finally, if he stands or sits absolutely still and speaks his lines so that they can be heard and is drilled into the correct reactions to the speeches of others, he will emerge on the night as a very passable imitation of a human being and may even be commended for his novel and rather striking interpretation of a small part. It is by such roundabout methods that the skilled amateur producer gets most of his praise! But his true reward is the secret knowledge that by taking infinite trouble he has saved the play from a temporary collapse, when most producers would have watched it collapse with the comforting (but quite unfounded) belief that it was no fault of theirs.

The principles for dealing with the hopeless incompetent apply in a limited way to the moderately competent. No actor should ever be asked to do what he cannot do convincingly. There is always more than one way of doing everything on the stage, and all ways are wrong which are beyond the compass of the actors.

## CHAPTER VIII

### REHEARSING A PLAY

Most books on production launch into the question of conducting rehearsals in one of the early chapters. That procedure is here reversed, because it appears useful that the inexperienced producer should have some inkling of what is the purpose of rehearsals before he is given elaborate instructions for conducting them. When it comes to the point every producer will conduct his rehearsals in his own way, but it may be valuable to give some account of the methods found most serviceable in a long experience. No time will be wasted on instructions which seem too obvious to need emphasis, such as "Carefully measure the space available for rehearsal and see that it corresponds to the size of the actual stage" (how often quite impossible!), or "Do not arrive late at rehearsals or the cast will arrive later still."

(1) *Before Rehearsals start.* On the very troublesome matter of choosing a play nothing will be said, except that no play is too ambitious provided it is selected with due regard to (a) the audience, (b) the cast, and (c) *the producer*. The Chestertonian precept, "If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly," should be accepted with reserve: why be content to do it badly? All that is necessary has been said about casting. Different societies have different methods, but in the last resort the producer must be responsible. There is considerable value in the practice often adopted of first reading the play sitting and then discussing it. Before proper rehearsals start, in addition to intensive study, the producer has another duty. *He must work out all the positions, movements, and business, and mark them in his book.*

We are here on controversial ground, since some producers disbelieve in this procedure and think it best to work

out positions on the stage in the course of rehearsal. Having tried both methods and seen both used by other producers, I am firmly convinced that it is infinitely better to plan positions in advance. The advantages are weighty. First, with a strange cast it gives an immediate authority to the producer if he knows exactly what positions he wants from the start; if he is at all uncertain (as he must be when the whole of a scene is not worked out beforehand) an opportunity is given to the cast to try to arrange things, and their whole *morale* suffers irremediably. Secondly, there is an enormous saving of time at the first rehearsals (though the producer must pay for this by the time he expends privately) and a considerable diminution of wear and tear, since nothing is more tiresome than alteration. Thirdly, the positions and movements will be designed much better if they are first worked out quietly in an arm-chair. There is little chance of thinking several strokes ahead in the stress of rehearsal, and no chance of working backwards from a 'big moment,' which is often desirable. Nor will bad movements be inserted from sheer necessity if there is leisure for taking quiet thought.

For these reasons the advantages of planning positions and movements in advance are overwhelming. Even when the play is a modern one with elaborate stage directions the producer must work through them in advance. Otherwise he will find that some groupings are impossible on his smaller stage, that one direction is inconsistent with another, that actors are told to rise when they have never been told to sit, and the like—whence uncertainty, argument, and loss of authority. Various methods of planning positions can be used, from model theatres with figures and other simpler three-dimensional devices, to mere diagrams. The last method demands the faculty of being able to visualize a scene from the flat—a faculty which comes with practice and is worth cultivating for its immense saving of time. The best way to mark the book when positions are worked out is by underlining stage directions which apply, marking in any other movements in the margin, and inserting frequent

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sketches with the characters shown by initials in their positions relative to each other and to the chief objects of furniture. Many producers who are unable to work neatly in the small space provided by margins paste the pages of the play into a note-book, so that the text is interleaved with blank pages. Occasional adjustments in the positions planned may have to be made when rehearsals start in the round, but that does not matter if they are made early. A considerable degree of skill and experience is required to work out positions well from the book, but the producer who can do it will so add to his status that every attempt is well repaid.

One further rule for the time before rehearsals start—a negative one. The characters should not be preconceived too exactly. If they are they will probably be visualized either as types based on the performances of other actors, or as they would be played by the producer himself. The actors concerned, however, will have another way and a better one, suited to their own personalities.

(2) **The First Rehearsals.** The first requisite is to get the positions known and the movements marked in the books of individuals. When a long play is being prepared it is generally advisable to concentrate on one act to start with, since an actor who gets the feel of his part in one act will take to the remaining acts much more easily. Apart from positions, character and diction should be the chief study of the first few rehearsals. It is only when the actors know their lines and get rid of their books that the play can begin to be built up in detail.

This is another controversial point, since some professional producers encourage their actors to retain their books for a considerable time, thinking that lines learned before they can be correctly spoken remain fixed in the mind in the wrong form and are altered with difficulty. There is much truth in this, but it is an argument only valid with professional actors; with amateurs the difficulty of giving the instruction which nearly all of them need while they still carry books is so great that it outweighs all



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selves, many of them would think it unnecessary to look round if a bomb exploded behind them, provided it was in the book and they knew it was coming.

It is of the utmost importance that rehearsals should be progressive; every one must be in some respect better than the last. The producer must be prepared to spend a certain amount of time before each rehearsal, especially in the more advanced stages, picking out points which still admit of improvement. If he can find nothing except minute points he can be pretty sure the performance will be a good one. Coaching a team of actors is very like coaching a crew at rowing. The inexperienced coach merely sees that the crew is not together, but, not knowing why, cannot improve on the vague exhortation, "Come on, now; you're not together. You *must* get together." The expert knows that he can only get them together by attending to *small details* in the style of the individuals. His aim is to secure that each outing is better than the last and that the crew come to the post at perfect racing pitch. If there is not constant progress the crew will get stale and begin to deteriorate. The producer should deal with his team on exactly the same principles, amending the whole gradually by attention to the part, and securing a steady and ordered advance.

Many of the diminutive points which exercise the producer will seem quite unimportant to the cast. He will have planned the tempo of each scene and its ascending and descending curves, but there is no reason to explain all this to the actors. Most of them would not understand what he was driving at. He must nevertheless secure the effect at which he aims to the best of his ability, and can only do so by small changes in detail—quickening a speech here or lengthening a pause there. If he knows his job the actors will feel that in some mysterious way these trifling changes bring vitality into the play, and they will submit with good humour.

Constant repetition is the only method of fixing an improvement. There is *no limit* to the *number of times* a passage can profitably be repeated except the endurance

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of the cast; the sensitive producer will feel when the breaking-point is about to be reached, and will pass on before it comes. It can be laid down as a minimum that every passage which causes difficulty should be done twice right—the second time to fix it in the memory—but a complicated series of movements or a significant piece of business may have to be done half a dozen times before it is once done right. It is this constant repetition until perfect rightness is achieved which distinguishes real rehearsal from the slapdash running through which passes for rehearsal with many amateur companies. There should be no such thing as a non-stop rehearsal until the dress rehearsal. The only reason for not stopping is perfection, and that is a condition unlikely to arise. In the later rehearsals the producer naturally will interrupt as little as he can, and as far as possible at moments when a natural break occurs in a scene, so that speed and fluency may not be impaired; but if there is no interruption no progress is being made and the rehearsal is wasted. Actors who grow restive under interruption belong to the class which considers that so long as the words are known everything is well.

I am aware that much of the last paragraph is controversial and that some producers adopt different methods. For example, Bernard Shaw, in the article on production already quoted, says:

When you have reached the end of the first stage, then call 'perfect' rehearsals (that is, without books). At those you must leave the stage and sit in the auditorium with a big note-book; *and from that time forth never interrupt a scene, nor allow anyone else to interrupt it or try back.*

This may have been very well for Shaw rehearsing under professional conditions, but to proceed on these lines with amateurs would be to head for disaster. It is true that the producer should aim at getting into the auditorium, or as far from the stage as he can, at the earliest possible moment (one of the reasons, it may be said in passing, why a producer should not also play a part if it can in any way be avoided).

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But the needs of the actors will be such, and the time for rehearsal generally so limited, that he will be lucky if he gets away from the stage, or its immediate vicinity, for more than the last few rehearsals. It is possible to interrupt scenes in rehearsal too often; but a far commoner failing with amateurs is that they are not interrupted enough, because the producer either sees nothing wrong or does not know how to put it right. No cast has ever got stale through excessive interruption by a producer who knows what he is about (though they may get restive): what induces staleness is repetition without progression. Nothing is achieved at rehearsal, it may be added, if the producer is not concentrating fanatically at every moment of it. The unforgivable crime—and it is all too common—is to retire from the stage and conduct private conversations on irrelevant topics. The producer must keep his critical faculties awake every moment. There must be none of that complacency which allows muddles and missed effects to pass. Every line and every action must be submitted to the test, "Have I considered what effect I am here trying to obtain, and have I obtained it convincingly?" Words or actions which are unconvincing must somehow be made to seem inevitable. It is but bare justice to the author to cut or alter the text, if necessary, to suit the abilities of the actors. No detail is so unimportant that it can be left to chance rather than forced into conformity with the producer's—that is, the author's—purpose. Mention has been made in a previous chapter of the value of the cast as critics. Full use should be made of them. It pleases them to be consulted, and their opinion is valuable. If it is asked for and is unanimous it should be unhesitatingly accepted. It will probably be right in any matter on which an audience is capable of forming an opinion.

Different producers must have their own methods of maintaining their authority, but it would seem to be the best principle strongly to discourage argument in the cast during rehearsals, but to welcome definite suggestions. A producer must have established unchallengeable confidence

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in himself to be able to play the complete autocrat successfully, and only a superman is qualified to do so without losing more than he gains.

It will do no harm to repeat that nothing can be taken for granted because it has once been done right. In the course of rehearsal, business which was once significant becomes slurred, movements which were once definite turn into aimless drifts, and reactions which were once pointed become meaningless. Constant watchfulness is required to see that every detail keeps its cutting edge. There will be a noticeable tendency to shorten pauses gradually, or to lengthen them. Only those with a sense of the stage can feel when a pause is right; for the remainder the best hope is to tell them the length of the pause and make them count the seconds.

The correct speed on cues must be insisted on as soon as the words are reasonably familiar. It will probably be helpful to explain that the secret of speed on cues is to take breath before the cue has been given, and not after. Verbal accuracy in cues is, of course, essential. In the later rehearsals a delay in taking a cue of even half a second should be rectified by repetition. Interrupted sentences and late entrances will without any doubt require special attention up to the last moment.

The producer should be on the look-out for those actors who are 'difficult to act with' and do what he can with them. Many quite good actors suffer from this failing through lack of stage sense. They are never quite in the right place and never make quite the right reaction; they give slightly wrong cues (so that it is impossible to take them up correctly), are unreliable with properties, move chairs about, and generally impede other actors. They are a serious liability in a cast because they cause a pervading uneasiness when they are on the stage, and may at any moment endanger the smooth running of a scene. They are not easy to deal with, because they are generally doing their best, but suffer from constitutional vagueness. They are, however, a serious enough problem to merit particular attention.

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The self-conscious actor also calls for special treatment. Demands which may mean nothing to one actor will inflict acute misery on another, and no one can do himself justice when he is in that state. It is often sheer brutality to demand repetition of some passage which an actor has done atrociously badly and obviously hates doing. The tactful producer will suggest an easier way and pass on, hoping that the self-conscious one will make a better show next time, when he has recovered his nerve. Consideration of this kind restores confidence and pays abundantly. Most amateur actors have their self-conscious moments, when they are doing something which they know they do badly (especially laughing, crying, or embracing), and the producer can help greatly by curtailing their uneasy prominence by a swift interruption. Many actors can laugh convincingly if some one else speaks quickly to help them out, but their assurance wilts at once if they are left long at it by themselves. A swift release will lubricate many sticky moments. The self-conscious actor is a misery to watch, and in the interests of dramatic illusion, as well as humanity, he should not be left unrelieved. Never on any account, whatever the provocation, should a producer allow himself to laugh at an unintentionally comic effect produced at rehearsal by a player who is doing his best in an emotional passage. This is an infallible method of breaking the heart of a sensitive actor. Some will take years to regain their shattered confidence; others will never regain it.

The importance of properties at rehearsals is obvious. Some sort of substitutes should be available as soon as books are discarded, and correct properties must be obtained long before the dress rehearsal. There are so many ways of using the simplest property wrongly that nothing should be left to chance.

The problem of understudies is difficult and troublesome, and no really satisfactory solution exists. To dispense with them altogether is to give hostages to fortune. In theory the best policy is to have a complete reserve cast, with the chief characters understudied

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by those playing smaller parts; and to foster enthusiasm by promising understudy rehearsals. In practice few understudies make any attempt to learn their words, their rehearsals are crowded out, and when a principal falls ill he is replaced by some one who is not his understudy. Against the rather nebulous advantages of amateur understudies can be set one very positive disadvantage—that principals with understudies are more inclined to absent themselves from rehearsal. Rehearsing without one of the chief characters is a complete waste of time for all concerned, and makes any progressive system of direction quite impossible. The producer should decide his policy in the light of these comments.

Finally something must be said on the matter of words. Since this is regarded as a notorious weakness of amateur performances, the producer should from the earliest stages do everything possible to eliminate the trouble—though there is little he can do beyond exhortation. It is worth mentioning, however, that study of the book between rehearsals is valuable right up to the last moment, and that no actor should be content to have fixed places where he always needs prompting. As soon as his uncertainty is narrowed down to a few known cruxes he can mark them and learn them from the book in such a way that they at least will never hold him up again. Returning to the book in the later stages of a production is also valuable for correcting discrepancies with the true text. The practice of paraphrasing lines is slovenly, unfair to the author, and utterly to be condemned. Giving inaccurate cues is vicious and criminal, for the reason already stated. It is extremely desirable that the prompter should attend all rehearsals when books have been discarded, if a long-suffering person can be found for this most tedious office; he will thus get a valuable familiarity with the play and the peculiarities of the players, and free the producer from the need to follow with the book.

It should not be necessary to say that the omission of the last line of the play—the 'tag'—from all rehearsals (at the

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dictate of superstition) is a perilous proceeding which no sane producer will allow.

(4) *The Dress Rehearsal.* Not much needs to be said about the dress rehearsal, since its function is obvious. Two dress rehearsals are a great advantage, especially in any play where the costumes are of an unfamiliar kind. The first should be stopped if any opportunity of valuable improvement presents itself; the second must be a straight run through, if possible with some sort of audience, and the producer should make notes and give his comments at the end of each act. The points of weakness to be noted fall into two classes: (a) errors in finish due to the neglect or slurring of technical devices for conveying significance; (b) blunders, hitches, and *gaucheries* which break the spell of dramatic illusion. The producer should make full use of this final opportunity for eradicating them. If there are any blatantly ragged moments it is absolutely essential that they should be taken again and smoothed over, either the same night or some other time before the first performance. In no other way can the trouble be eliminated—it is no good talking about ragged moments or giving exhortations. The cast should not be allowed to comfort themselves with the fallacy that a bad dress rehearsal means a good first night. A bad dress rehearsal from the scenic point of view is to be anticipated, with the difficulties under which amateurs labour, but if the acting goes wrong it means that there is no margin of safety, and it may easily go wrong again. However, the position need not give rise to despair; even professional companies have had bad dress rehearsals before now!

(5) *Décor* and *Costume.* No account of the rehearsing of a play is complete without some mention of *décor* and costume, artistic responsibility for which rests on the producer in addition to his purely histrionic cares. These large subjects cannot here be dealt with technically. All that is intended is to suggest a line of approach.

The word '*décor*,' as commonly used, includes the setting of a scene, with its design, colouring, and decoration, the

furniture or other movable objects placed in it, and the lighting of it. The producer who is pictorial artist enough to design his own *décor* has an immense advantage; lacking that gift, he must secure the co-operation of an artist. Far too many amateur performances show a complete absence of artistic conception in their settings, which suggest that the producer, overawed by fear of expense and other practical difficulties, has been defeated in advance. But what other producers with similar difficulties have achieved shows that their defeat is premature. The producer, whether artist or not, must be responsible for the general conception of his settings, with their dominant character, their atmosphere, and their practical facilities; then, if need be, he may turn to the artist, who will translate his notions into a practicable design. At this point the technicians who are to put the design into effect come into the picture, and here very often the trouble starts. The stage director, if he lacks an artistic sense, has it in his power to spoil the best design, and he frequently does. It is not too much to say that the artistic scope of the scene-painter must be taken into account as a limiting factor in the design of scenery. If, for example, he cannot paint scenes successfully with anything but a flat wash (though he thinks he can) and no one else is available to do the painting, the scene must be designed so that only flat washes are required. Nothing is so certain to stultify a good design as inexpert scene-painting.

Imaginative settings in the amateur theatre normally show far greater taste and a better sense of pictorial values than realistic scenes, and the chief reason for this is that imaginative settings *must* be designed. Realistic interiors too often grow uncontrolled from existing material; they are disfigured by every kind of faded scenic convention, and show no mark of design of any kind. The producer who wishes to present, say, a normal middle-class drawing-room should examine a real example with fresh observation. He will note that on entering such a room one does not step over a board two or three inches high. The doors are



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panelled, nearly always coloured differently from the walls, and set in wooden frames of the same colour. They have mortice locks, and not latches. The windows are also set in wooden frames, coloured like the door frames, and conform to a recognizable type of window that can be opened. The curtains hang on a pole which is either reasonably decorative or concealed by a pelmet. The fireplace juts into the room to form a chimney-breast and has a mantelpiece solidly attached to it. At least one of the corners of the room, and generally all, are rectangular. There is a wooden wainscot painted like the door frames, and generally a picture-rail or cornice, or both; and the space above the picture-rail is normally white. Some of these variations from the average amateur interior depend on a solidity of structure which may not be immediately attainable; but most of them can be achieved by anyone with an elementary knowledge of scene-painting. Let it be said again—*every set must be designed*. Even the simplest and most ordinary interior gives the artist an opportunity of satisfying the eye by its colour and form.

Lack of artistic purpose often appears also in the dressing of the set. All living-rooms have one property in common—that they are lived in: but many amateur interiors lack this quality. The producer, knowing what is the note he wishes to strike—luxury, homeliness, poverty, primness, or what you will—must see that ‘habitability’ is added. If a man he may be well advised at this point to call on the help of a woman—most of them have a surer touch in this matter; though he must see that she does not create her own room, but that of a person with (probably) a quite different temperament. As with most dramatic affairs, the right effect is gained by a true conception pointed by significant detail.

Those who must play to a curtain background, or a combination of curtains and flats, should know that they are much better off than they would be with an undesigned and ill-constructed box set. Curtains are an unrepresentational background which all audiences will accept, provided

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no attempt is made, by hanging pictures on them and such absurdities, to treat them as representational. But it is obvious that if curtains are used even more care must be taken with everything that appears on the stage. When there is nothing to create visual atmosphere except furniture, costumes, properties, and lighting the producer must see that he gets from all these every grain of help they will afford.

On the subject of lighting, which is so largely technical, little can be added here to what was said (under 'Invisibility') in Chapter I, where it was stressed that one of the functions of lighting is to illuminate. But it can do much besides if it is made an integral part of the whole scenic design. The stage manager must prepare a proper lighting plot, which alone can ensure that the electrician is in step with the actors and the action. If a separate lighting rehearsal cannot be held (and there is no denying that conditions may impose almost insuperable obstacles) the producer must at least be aware that another risk has been introduced into an uncertain future. A final point: it is almost worth appointing a whole-time functionary to see that the actors, on the rise of the curtain, are not faced by a glaringly illuminated audience.

Much that has been said about *décor* applies also to costume. The producer is fortunate if he can design his own dresses; if he cannot he must at least see that they are designed by some one who can carry out his wishes. This is not to suggest (what is often an impossibility) that all costumes should be especially made, but only that they must form part of a coherent artistic plan, fitting in both with a true conception of the characters and with the general colour scheme of the *décor*. When a period play is undertaken the costumes must not only be well designed, they must also be properly worn. Correct deportment in costume is not an accomplishment which comes easily to us of the twentieth century, and in view of its supreme importance the producer cannot afford to defer the wearing of period dress to the last stages of rehearsal. When the costumes

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are not available till the dress rehearsal he must at least see that substitutes for such articles as crinolines, panniers, trains, cloaks, and elaborate headgear are frequently worn. It may so be secured that the actors do not exhibit the crudities of behaviour which result from wearing a strange fancy dress for the first time.

From what has been said it will be clear that the producer must at least be the inspiration and guiding light of a team of artists and technical experts—the designers of *décor* and costume, the stage manager, and the electrician. If he is himself both artist and technical expert his path will be far easier. It is on the smooth co-operation and harmonious conceptions of this team that the pictorial success of his endeavours will depend.

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his team up to concert pitch for the night he will never do so, and it is no good worrying further.

If the play is to have a run of any length (a very rare possibility for amateurs) it will be necessary to watch that the inevitable slurring does not creep in again. The tendency is so strong with amateur actors that if they had a run of several months it would be necessary to rehearse the play afresh each week. It is not unknown even for professional companies to be summoned to rehearsal in the middle of a run.

Whenever there are more than two performances of a play it may be extremely helpful to know the time taken by each act. The information may be surprising. A very good first night is sometimes followed by a second which is inexplicably flat. There are several possible reasons for this: the cast may be over-confident, having lost that nervousness which keys up an actor to his best; the audience may be of a different quality and less responsive; or the actors, by an unconscious tendency to savour success to the full, may have slowed down the whole production. The following details of four amateur performances of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* are instructive. On the first night the players were at their best, the audience was intensely held, and the acting time of the play was 144 minutes. On the second night the play entirely lost its grip, although the actors were unaware that they had altered their performance at all, and attributed the fall in temperature to the coldness of the audience. But the watch told another story: the acting time of the play had increased from 144 to 151 minutes! With this irrefutable evidence in hand the producer said his say, and on the third night the cast, now considerably less confident, reduced the acting time to 146 minutes and regained their hold on the audience. On the last night approximately the same time was returned, the performance having attained a temporary stability. For a single act (Act III) the times of the four nights were as follows: 32, 36, 33, and 33 minutes. These figures show the almost incredible fluctuations in performance to which

amateurs are liable. It is not for nothing that, even in the professional theatre, one of the duties of the stage-manager is to keep a detailed time-sheet of each performance to ensure that there is not a gradual deviation from the producer's intention during the course of a run.

If public opinion in front of the footlights, or behind, should demand 'curtain calls' at the end of a play (and how much better if it did not!) steps should be taken to see that the cast's final appearance is not a ragged and shamefaced exhibition of discomfort. The 'curtain call' must be rehearsed like every other stage appearance. The stage manager should see to it, but if things go wrong the producer will be to blame.

(2) 'Putting in More on the Night.' Most producers have at some time or other been victimized by that most difficult kind of actor, the one who keeps something up his sleeve for the night. The forces in reserve most commonly find expression in over-acting. The laughter of an audience seems to go to the heads of some actors; once they have evoked it, they lose all sense of fitness and leave no exaggeration untried in their efforts to evoke more. Since their efforts are frequently successful, it is difficult to convince them of error. Restlessness, improvised business, and false emotional emphasis are other manifestations of the 'doing-more-on-the-night' spirit. Unrehearsed innovations may on occasion add some spurious glitter to an individual performance, but they may also upset the whole balance of the play and will certainly damage its smoothness and significance. The producer cannot insist too often that all the actor's tricks must be brought out for approval at rehearsal. The whole idea of doing more on the night is amateurish (in the worst sense), selfish, anti-social, unintelligent, and generally deplorable. It is true that every actor, if he is a real actor, will be different on the night; he has rehearsed in a vacuum, and it is not till the emotional circuit is completed by the response of an audience that character and emotion come to life. But the difference must be in essence and not in externals, and the actor must

rigidly confine himself within the same movements, gestures, and general attack as he has used at rehearsals. It should be quite clear that this is appreciated before the night. Afterwards is too late.

(3) **The Perfect Prompter.** The more serious spirit in the amateur theatre to-day leads most actors to be word-perfect, but the prompter must inevitably be a more prominent member of an amateur than a professional company (except on Sundays). Rightly treated, however, he could be less prominent than he often is. A bad 'dry', which some producers regard with equanimity as an unavoidable mishap, involves the utter collapse of dramatic illusion. The audience can no longer suspend their disbelief when they see Lady Teazle revert to being Mrs X, the doctor's wife, who has forgotten her words again. It is equally disillusioning when they discover (as they inevitably will) that Charles Surface always clears his throat at the end of a sentence when he wants a prompt, or thinks he is going to.

The essential thing is that prompts should be given *instantly* when required, without being given at intentional pauses (an infallible way of rattling most actors). A prompt forestalling a 'dry' is rarely heard by the audience; afterwards it might as well be given by the town-crier. It should be remembered that not so long ago it was the practice for the prompter to read the whole play through aloud while the action proceeded, and at least one amateur producer in England did so till recently; yet few of the audience were conscious of it, because the sound never broke into a silence that had established itself. The prompt when given must be reasonably loud—whispered prompts are useless, except those given by another actor, which are often valuable.

Great familiarity with the rendering of a play is necessary if prompts are to be instantaneous (that is, before silence is established) without being given during necessary pauses. But even if, as often happens, the prompter has only been able to attend a few rehearsals he can still do his task

efficiently with a properly marked copy. The text should be marked with a coloured line at every point where a pause of more than a second occurs and a double line for pauses of several seconds. (Unless the producer is in a position to do this, he has a very sketchy idea of the timing of the play.) The prompter should then be instructed, "Except as shown by the coloured lines in your book, if ever you have had time to say 'one thousand' at the end of a sentence don't look for signals of distress, but prompt in a clear voice *at once*." This may sound like a counsel of perfection, but it has been done, and it is worth doing. A production which falls below the standard of timing implied is unfinished.

Above all the prompter must have the full confidence of the cast. Nothing is so demoralizing to certain actors as a prompter who is inattentive, unreliable, or inaudible. If he shows himself to be such beyond redemption tactful elimination is necessary in the general interest.

(4) **Scenery and Properties.** In the last chapter the importance of design in everything connected with stage *décor* was emphasized; but the best design can easily be ruined by lack of practical efficiency. Many producers have a wrong sense of values on this point. Even those who show imagination and taste in their scenic design frequently tolerate a ramshackle and slovenly application of it. It can be stated with certainty that for the maintenance of dramatic illusion practical efficiency is even more important than good design.

The producer who can read through the following list of glaring defects in a simple interior scene and confidently aver that his settings are not normally marred by more than half of them has some cause for satisfaction: flats not vertical, wobbly, admitting daylight through the joints; warped doors, able to be opened (a few inches at least) either way, reluctant to stay shut; curtains which sag in the middle and do not join; crooked pictures; mantelpieces looking like boards attached—with a slope—to screw hooks; borders which droop and do not mask the flies. All these

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blots *can* be lived down by good acting, but they weight the scales heavily against the establishment of dramatic illusion. The producer cannot do everything, and such scenic blemishes may be beyond his control—they certainly will be unless he has enough technical knowledge to advise usefully on how to correct them. The important thing is that he should not consider them immaterial.

The above list of inefficiencies does not include, it will be noted, that age-long perversity, the sticking curtain. Even a stage-hand can see that this is not desirable; and its persistent recurrence in amateur shows—"when it has never happened before"—must be put down to some malign supernatural influence.

Excessive intervals due to changes of scene, however, are definitely within the producer's control, and by some means or other he must eliminate them. There is no excuse for the producer who regards intolerable delays as 'acts of God.' The play is in his hands, and in order to interpret it he must at every moment consider the mind of the audience to whom the message is directed or must see that the stage manager does so. Tedious intervals must go. Ease of scene-changing should be the very first consideration when the design is decided on. But simplicity of design is not enough. Any scene change will take a wholly unnecessary time unless it is organized and drilled, with definite duties allotted to each scene-shifter. The changing of furniture, properties, and ornaments demands equal care and planning, since clearing and resetting the stage frequently takes longer than striking one scene and setting another. When the scenery takes material form, if it is found to be less practicable than was expected drastic action is needed. The producer, if he is a practical man, may be able to accelerate the methods of the stage manager (who frequently is not a student of psychology) by personal assistance or simplification or more elaborate organization. This is one of the rare occasions when the producer is justified in being tactless. If even tactlessness does not secure the desired result he must go farther and be Cromwellian. When an edict for the



wholesale removal of baubles has been pronounced the stage manager will probably think of something better.

The setting of the stage is a matter for the producer himself, unless he is sure that the stage manager or some other properly instructed person can do it with certainty and precision. Few actors are capable of setting a scene correctly (unless they are specially drilled for it), and the average stage-hand does not think it matters within a yard or two how the furniture is arranged. It should be unnecessary to point out that, if smoothness and finish are to be counted on with inexperienced actors, everything in the scene should be arranged to within an inch of its accustomed place.

Properties offer many occasions of blundering; in fact, muddles connected with them are the commonest cause of horrific emergencies. Even if the crisis passes unobserved by the audience (who are mercifully blind to such things, provided the play can be kept running smoothly) the effect on the actors is nerve-racking. The property manager must never be allowed to trust to his memory, or some day he will fail, be he never so efficient. The property plot must be in writing. "Safety first" is the only motto for all matters of stage detail.

(5) *Make-up.* Many books and sections of books on the subject of make-up are in existence, and no attempt will be made here to deal fully with the technical side of the matter. But something must be said to emphasize its importance in a finished performance. There is no ancillary branch of the dramatic art in which it is more essential that the producer should have expert knowledge. Bad make-up brands a performance instantly as amateurish and unworthy of serious attention. Although all conscientious actors should be encouraged to make themselves up, the producer must have expert knowledge in order to criticize with authority, to amend a faulty make-up where necessary, and to deal with those who are incapable of *making themselves up at all*.

It may be worth mentioning the commonest faults

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which will appear in a make-up done by an inexperienced hand.

- (i) The whole make-up hopelessly overdone.
- (ii) Too much grease and too little powder used, so that the face is shiny. Apart from its unattractive appearance, this causes the face to reflect light, so that artificial lines are neutralized.
- (iii) Lines too pronounced and in the wrong place. The effect aimed at in lining should be shadows assisted by high lights, but it must be remembered that high lights tend to show up more at a distance than close at hand.
- (iv) Artificial hair applied in excess and badly. The proper use of *crêpe* hair demands considerable skill, and the less of it used the better.
- (v) Wigs badly joined. This is always an extremely skilled business, and with the makeshift wigs to which amateurs are frequently reduced a good join is generally impossible. Powder, grease-paint, or burnt cork applied to natural hair are far easier to deal with, and should be used whenever possible.
- (vi) It may be forgotten that when a foundation of grease-paint is put on the whole face the darkness of a man's shaven chin and jaw is obliterated. Unless youth is required, this should be restored artificially. Conversely, the discreet darkening of this part of the face goes a long way to make a young man look middle-aged.
- (vii) In female make-up the colour is frequently applied in the wrong place, being put on the cheek only (so giving a doll-like appearance), instead of on the cheek-bone and temple, spreading on to the cheek.

If there is a large cast to be made up and a sufficiency of expert assistants is not available it is absolutely necessary for a producer to make arrangements in advance. It may

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not be known that anyone who has the slightest aptitude for drawing or is neat-fingered in a general way can be taught a sufficiency of the art of make-up in one practical lesson of an hour or so. They will not, of course, be able to do a difficult make-up, but they will manage a straightforward one far better than a person who has no manual aptitude but a certain amount of experience. A soft and pleasing texture in make-up is achieved by the artistic at the first instructed attempt.

And so the curtain descends on the producer's finished effort. If he has shown an infinite capacity for taking pains over detail, and if those pains have been directed to seeing that the play comes to life and that all its significance is conveyed, at least the dramatist will have had his chance.

## CHAPTER X . BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE

### A PRODUCER'S ANALYSIS OF "IN THE ZONE," BY EUGENE O'NEILL <sup>1</sup>

IN this chapter a detailed analysis is given of the methods by which a play is brought to life. The play selected is one which has many merits for this purpose. It is written by a master-craftsman. Few dramatists could extract so much suspense from so slight a theme. In many ways it is a model of what a one-act play should be. The characterization is done with the utmost skill, as it must be if character is to be established in thirty minutes or so. The psychological atmosphere is created with firm and masterly touches, and the sympathy of the audience is surely engaged. The rhythmic curves of suspense are clearly marked, and if they are not properly brought out there is no hope of tension being created and maintained. Although the stage directions alone would not enable an unskilled producer to bring the play off, they give all the assistance that could possibly be given. Not one is superfluous, and all are significant and inevitably right.

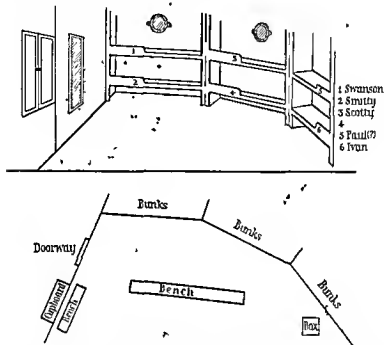
The plot of the play can be summarized in a few lines. A sailor in a steamer in the war zone, during the First Great War, is suspected of possessing a bomb. The bomb turns out to be a packet of love-letters from a girl who has turned him down because he is a drunkard. A more promising theme for bathos and anticlimax could scarcely be devised, and even after what the author has done for it it remains a dangerous theme for an unskilled producer.

The scene is the forecastle of a tramp steamer. It is described in detail in the stage directions of *Bound East for*

<sup>1</sup> The long extracts from the play are printed by permission of the author and Messrs Jonathan Cape, Ltd.

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*Cardiff*, a play which is included in the same volume (*The Moon of the Caribbees, and other Plays of the Sea*). The setting prescribed is rather complicated for ordinary amateur resources, and a simplification of it is suggested in the accompanying sketches.



The version of the play given in this chapter is based on this simplified setting, though no attempt is made to describe the positions. Exact verisimilitude in detail is, of course, unnecessary. Few of the audience will have been inside a ship's fore-castle, and those who have will soon forget their criticisms when the play begins to live. The atmosphere should be suggested by the bunks and such details as a doorway with a coaming, and the ship's lamp, which should be the supposed source of illumination for the scene. Suggestive lighting will by itself go a long way to create the right atmosphere. The lamp will be more effective

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suspended than on the floor, and might well be set swinging slightly before the curtain rises. The gentle swish of the sea should be suggested during the first part of the play, but should gradually fade out. The costumes can be almost anything, as long as the seafaring touch is not over-emphasized—the crew of a tramp steamer do not dress like the crew of a yacht at Cowes Regatta. There may be a peaked sailor's cap or two, and an occasional blue jersey (it is a brilliantly fine night in autumn, so there is no demand for sou'westers), but cloth caps and waistcoats and white sweaters should give a drab, seedy, dockyard note to the majority of the characters. Footgear may be anything from gum boots to gym shoes. “ “

The suggested allotment of the men's bunks is shown in the sketch at p. 166.

The original text of the play, with the stage directions, is given exactly, except for the parts enclosed in heavy square brackets, in which the action is summarized.

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Paul is a mystery man. Though he is twice mentioned in the directions, the references are inconsistent, and he is better omitted.

Provided he takes his time in his business, Smitty can hardly go wrong with these stage directions.

It is essential that Davis should be seen clearly and his identity registered by the audience. For this and other reasons the position of the doorway is highly important. The two chief essentials in the design of the scene are that Smitty's bunk and the doorway should be clearly visible to every member of the audience.

The suitcase must be placed where all can see it plainly—e.g., on a bench.

Scotty's awakening will be more certain to catch the attention if his first movement is a sudden start.

With the suggested arrangement of bunks the order of waking the men will be: Swanson, Smitty, Scotty, Ivan. The waking of Smitty must be made deeply significant. Davis must stand still for a few seconds intently watching his reactions. He should turn suddenly as he moves to Scotty's bunk to look at him again.

The atmosphere of dull depression must be suggested powerfully by the way the men get up. *Plenty of time must be taken*, and it must be helped by sound—coughing, grunting, and occasional muttering. Movements must be lifeless and lumbering. Irritability should be suggested, perhaps in the handling of the coffee-pot. Davis must be prominently placed, and his suspicions of Smitty must be apparent.

It should be noticed how the author starts the dialogue with something *which shall justify the long silence which has preceded*. It is an explosive hint at the character of Davis, which is to dominate the play. But it is not to dominate this moment. The drawling voice of Swanson expresses the mood of the others—too bored and sleepy to get excited about anything. The staccato nagging of the Welshman and Swanson's grumpy drawl give an opening for effective 'orchestration' of sound. A good noise off is required for the shutting of the port, and the noise of the sea should diminish simultaneously.

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Five men, SCOTTY, IVAN, SWANSON, SMITTY, and PAUL, are in their bunks apparently asleep. It is about ten minutes to twelve on a night in the autumn of 1915.

SMITTY turns slowly in his bunk, and, leaning over the side, looks from side to side at the other of the men as if to assure himself that they are asleep. Then he climbs slowly out of his bunk and stands in the middle of the fore-castle fully dressed, but in his stocking feet, glancing around him suspiciously. Reassured, he leans down and cautiously pulls out a telescope from under the bunks in front of him.

Just at this moment DAVIS appears in the doorway, carrying a large warming coffee-pot in his hand. He stops short when he sees SMITTY. A puzzled expression comes over his face, followed by one of suspicion, and he retreats farther into the alleyway where he can watch SMITTY without being seen.

All the latter's movements indicate a fear of discovery. He takes a small bunch of keys and unlocks the suitcase, making a slight noise as he does so.

SCOTTY wakes up and peers at him over the side of the bunk. SMITTY opens the suitcase and takes out a small black tin box, carefully places it under his mattress, shoves the suitcase back under his bunk, climbs into his bunk again, and begins to snore loudly.

DAVIS enters the fore-castle, places the coffee-pot beside the lantern, goes from one to the other of the sleepers and shakes them vigorously, saying to each in a low voice: Near eight bells, Scotty. Arise and dress, Ivan. Eight bells, Swanson. Eight bells, Ivan. SMITTY yawns loudly, with great pretence of having been dead asleep.

All the rest of the men tumble out of their bunks, stretching and yawning, and commence to pull on their shoes. They go one by one to the board near the open door, take out their cups and spoons, and sit down together on the benches. The coffee-pot is passed round. They munch their biscuits and sip their coffee in dull silence.

DAVIS [suddenly jumping to his feet—nervously]. Where's that air coming from? {All are startled and look at him wonderingly.

SWANSON [a squat, surly-faced Swede—grumpily]. What air? I don't feel nothing.

DAVIS [excitedly]. I kin feel it—a draught. [He stands on the deck and looks round—suddenly exploding.] Damn-fool square-head! [He leans over the upper bunk in which PAUL is sleeping (?) and opens the porthole shut.] I got a good notion to report him. Serve the bloody well right! What's the use of blinding the ports when that thickhead goes and leaves 'em open?



## THE TECHNIQUE OF PLAY PRODUCTION

Ivan should be rather an exaggerated character, the sort of man who is a figure of fun to his shipmates at more felicitous moments.

The contrast between the interest aroused by anything Smitty now has to say, in Davis and Scotty on the one hand, and Swanson and Ivan on the other, must be strongly marked. The two latter go on drinking, uninterested.

Note how the author points this, the first peak in the curve of the dialogue.

The reaction here must be very carefully rehearsed. All eyes are turned quickly to Davis. The producer should remember the trick of marking significance by interrupting some action. This is a changing point in the atmosphere. The prevailing mood is now uneasiness, not boredom.

A pause of about three seconds divides this remark of Smitty's from Davis's last speech.

The point about the ship's cargo must be plainly made.

Ivan reinforces it.

Swanson might well rise as he speaks. Perhaps he has been sitting on a bunk in order to give depth to the grouping, and now moves down, say, to get another biscuit.

Swanson stands with a biscuit poised above the tin and looks in a puzzled way to Scotty and Davis as each speaks.

This to Swanson, of course.

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SWANSON [*yawning, too sleepy to be roused by anything—carelessly*]. Dey don't see what little light go out yust one port.

SCOTTY [*protestingly*]. Dinna be a loon, Swanson. D'ye no ken the dangerr o' showin' a licht wi' a pack o' submarrines lyin' about?

IVAN [*shaking his shaggy, ox-like head in an emphatic affirmative*]. Dot's right, Scotty. I don' li-like blow up—no, by devil!

SMITTY [*his manner slightly contemptuous*]. I don't think there's much danger of meeting any of their submarines, not until we get into the War Zone, at any rate.

DAVIS. [*He and SCOTTY look at SMITTY suspiciously, harshly.*] You don't, eh? [*He lowers his voice and speaks slowly.*] Well, we're in the War Zone right this minit if you wants to know.

[*The effect of this speech is instantaneous. All sit bolt upright on their benches and stare at DAVIS.*]

SMITTY. How do you know, Davis?

DAVIS [*angrily*]. 'Cos Drisc beard the First send the Third below to wake the skipper when we fetched the Zone—'bout five bells, it was. Now what y' got to say?

SMITTY [*conciliatingly*]. Ob, I wasn't doubting your word, Davis, but you know they're not pasting up bulletins to let the crew know when the Zone is reached—especially on ammunition ships like this.

IVAN [*decidedly*]. I don't li-like dis voyage. Next time I ship on windjammer Boston to River Plate, load with wood only, so it float, by golly!

SWANSON [*fretfully*]. I hope British Navy blow 'em to hell, those submarines, py damn!

SCOTTY [*looking at SMITTY, who is staring at the doorway in a dream, his chin on his hands—meaningly*]. It is no' the submarrines only we've to fear, I'm thinking.

DAVIS [*assenting eagerly*]. That's no lie, Scotty.

SWANSON. You mean the mines?

SCOTTY. I wasna thinkin' o' mines eitherr.

DAVIS. There's many a good ship blown up and at the bottom of the sea what never hit no mine or torpedo.

SCOTTY. Did ye neverr read of the Gertman spies and the dirtty work they're doing all the War?

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Swanson notes their glances, and is infected with some dim, perplexed suspicion about Smitty. His uneasiness is visibly increased. Ivan is too much of an animal to notice these subtleties.

Davis's "Well," foreshadowing some startling accusation, and his decision not to make it after all, are important in the creation of suspense. The audience should be led to share his suspicions about Smitty by every touch possible.

Jack *must* be an actor of personality. He must be felt on the stage from the moment of his entry as the one sane spot in this edgy, neurotic crew. A position standing in the background will be valuable for him at times, where he can show a certain detachment from the others (as well as give depth to the grouping).

If Davis crosses to Jack before the second part of this speech its significance will be greatly intensified. Thus is suspense accumulated.

The interruption must be exactly timed. Davis is about to tell his secret when the *voice* of Cocky dries up his words. With the entry of Cocky ("a wizened runt of a man," petky and spiteful and worthless) and Driscoll ("a hrawny Irishman with the battered features of a prize-fighter") the temperature rises instantly, and the 'War Zone' atmosphere leaps forward. The 'orchestration' of sound is altogether more blatant.

They not only jump, but they look round quickly to see what has made the noise.

The entry of Driscoll and Cocky, culminating in this irrational outburst, gives the next peak in the series of curves. Then the tension sinks to a grumbling, exasperated gloom.

Davis's hint about Smitty is the first sign of the rising tension. All look round nervously as they hear Scotty's step. Is it Smitty returning? Then Davis begins to work up the suspense in earnest. The stage directions tell most of the reactions of the listeners. Once Davis has got hold of them they are all very still, gazing at him eagerly, with slight uneasy movements when he stops speaking.

The next peak—not, like the last one, noisy, but very quiet. "Black iron box" is very slow and almost in a whisper. The tension is maintained and grows, until the box has been actually seen. Little slow movements of the hands and fingers will help.

## BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE

[*He and DAVIS both glance at SMITTY, who is deep in thought and not listening to the conversation.*

DAVIS. An' the clever way they fool you!

SWANSON. Sure, I read it in paper many time.

DAVIS. Well . . . [*He is about to speak, but hesitates and finishes lamely.*] You got to watch ont, that's all I says.

[Shortly afterwards Jack enters ("a young American, with a tough, good-natured face"). There is more 'War Zone' talk. Ivan, Swanson, and Scotty go out for duty, and Smitty is roused from his reverie to do the same.]

JACK [*looking after SMITTY with a frown*]. He's a queer guy. I can't figure him out.

DAVIS. Nor no one else. [*Lowering his voice meaningly*] An' he's liable to turn out queerer than any of us think if we ain't careful.

JACK [*suspiciously*]. What d'yuh mean?

[*They are interrupted by the entrance of DRISCOLL and COCKY.*  
COCKY [*protestingly*]. Blimey if I don't sink I'll put in this 'ere watch ahtside on deck. [*He and DRISCOLL go over and get their cups.*] I don't want to be caught in this 'ole if they 'its us.

[*He pours out coffee.*

DRISCOLL [*pouring his*]. Divil a bit ut wud matther where ye arre. Ye'd he blow'n to smithereens b'fore ye cud say your name. [*He sits down, overturning as he does so the untouched cup of coffee which SMITTY has forgotten and left on the bench. They all jump nervously as the tin cup hits the floor with a bang. DRISCOLL flies into an unreasoning rage.*] Who's the dirty scut left this cup where a man 'ud sit on it?

[The fact that it is Smitty's cup leads to unkind reflections on their shipmate's 'gentlemanly' ways. Then the dialogue reverts to the War Zone again, and a nervous gloom sets in, into which Davis throws a sinister hint about Smitty. Scotty returns, and is posted at the door to see that Smitty does not come back, while Davis tells what he has seen.]

DAVIS. He bends down and reaches out his hand sort of scared-like, like it was something dangerous he was after, an' feels round in under his duds—hidden in under his duds and wrapped up in 'em, it was. An' he brings out a black iron box!

From the moment the mattress is mentioned they are fascinated by it.

There is a pause while Jack looks at the bunk, and then back to Davis.

Another pause while Jack looks again at the bunk and his purpose is seen to form. Driscoll jumps up to grab him.

The lifting and replacing of the mattress are very slow, and there is another pause before Jack speaks.

After this agonized whine the tension is allowed to subside again. But from now on the men *and the audience* are conscious of a bomb within a few feet of them.

After a few moments during which the men are nonplussed by their situation Davis succeeds in whipping up the tension again, but it is a tension of a different kind. Anger is gradually superimposed on their fear. Davis uses all the arts of the demagogue, and even Jack's note of sanity is shaken.

The stage directions for Smitty's entry leave nothing to be said, except that the men relax their strained positions as Smitty's hand is withdrawn from the mattress.

This is the next peak, much higher than any hitherto. The crew watch Smitty out in silence, and their speech when it breaks out is quick and low and intensely excited. The tension must not be allowed to relax till the black box is safely in the bucket of water.

## BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE

COCKY [*looking round him with a frightened glance*]. Gawd blimey!

[*The others likewise betray their uneasiness, shuffling their feet nervously.*]

DAVIS. Ain't that right, Scotty?

SCOTTY. Right as rain, I'm telling ye.

DAVIS [*to the others, with an air of satisfaction*]. There you are! [*Lowering his voice*] And then what do ye suppose he did? Sneaks to his bunk an' slips the black box in under his mattress—in under his mattress, mind!

JACK. And it's there now?

DAVIS. Course it is!

[*JACK starts towards SMITTY's bunk. DRISCOLL grabs him by the arm.*]

DRISCOLL. Don't be touchin' ut, Jack.

JACK. You needn't worry. I ain't going to touch it. [*He pulls up SMITTY's mattress and looks down. The others stare at him, holding their breaths. He turns to them, trying to assume a careless tone.*] It's there aw right.

COCKY [*miserably upset*]. I'm gointer 'op it aht on deck. [*He gets up, but DRISCOLL pulls him down again. COCKY protests.*] It fair gives me the trembles sittin' still in here.

[*DAVIS has now proved his case, and he goes on to stir his shipmates to action. He mentions the open porthole, and Smitty's unknown origins. Bitter resentment against Smitty begins to assert itself. Only Jack tries to exercise some restraint.*]

Smitty comes in and sits on his bunk. He is seen to feel for his box furtively under the mattress. He makes a suspicious remark, becomes aware of the atmosphere of hostility, and goes out.]

[*There is silence for a moment after his departure, and then a storm of excited talk breaks out.*]

DAVIS. Did you see him feelin' if it was there?

COCKY. 'E ain't 'arf a sly one wiv 'is talk of submarines, Gawd blind 'im.

SCOTTY. Did ye see the sneakin' looks he gave us?

DRISCOLL. If iver I saw black shame on a man's face 'twas on his when he sat there!

## THE TECHNIQUE OF PLAY PRODUCTION

Jack's conviction should mean the conviction of the audience.

The timing of the thud must be right to a tenth of a second. The motion to rush for the door is made as part of the rising. After that the men are transfixed, afraid to move. The moment of stillness should last three or four seconds.

This ejaculation of Cocky's is an abject whimper.

This and the preceding remarks make a fine opportunity for the effective 'orchestration' of sound.

There is a general spasmodic movement as if to stop him.

Quick as a flash, and as near a scream as a Scot can get. The picture must be held dead still for a moment.

Davis's wiser thought comes in much more quietly.

Jack's movement is hesitant. Is this wise?

Scotty gives a nervous glance back, in case the bomb goes off behind him.

Every eye is glued to the box. It is a bomb, within a yard of them! Cocky will be taking partial cover behind some one. The grouping, of course, needs elaborate care at this moment of breathless strain. Before "easy!" Jack might touch the bucket audibly with the box--the signal for a spasmodic start. With the box in the water the strain is relaxed, though all eyes are still glued to the bucket. The action sinks to the bottom of a curve again.

If the play has been kept at the right pitch what follows is easy. Nothing can go wrong now until just before the end.

There are three separate struggles, each more vigorous than the last, with a slight relaxation of tension between each.

Cocky's yelling will provoke laughter, and should do so.

## BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE

JACK [*thoroughly convinced at last*]. He looked bad to me. He's a crook aw right.

DAVIS [*excitedly*]. What'll we do? We gotter do something quick or——

[*He is interrupted by the sound of something hitting against the port side of the forecastle with a dull, heavy thud. The men start to their feet in wild-eyed terror and turn as if they were going to rush for the deck. They stand that way for a strained moment, scarcely breathing and listening intently.*]

JACK [*with a sickly smile*]. Hell! It's on'y a piece of drift-wood or a floating log.

[*He sits down again.*]

DAVIS [*sarcastically*]. Or a mine that didn't go off—that time—or a piece of wreckage from some ship they've sent to Davy Jones.

COCKY [*wiping his brow with a trembling hand*]. Blimey!

[*He sinks back weakly on a bench.*]

DRISCOLL [*furiously*]. God blarst ut! No man at all cud be puttin' up with the loike av this—an' I'm not wan to be fearin' anything or any man in the world'll stand up to me face to face, but this divil's trickery in the darrk——[*He starts for SMITTY's bunk.*] I'll throw ut out wan av the portholes an' be done wid ut.

[*He reaches towards the mattress.*]

SCOTTY [*grabbing his arm—wildly*]. Arre ye daft, mon?

DAVIS. Don't monkey with it, Drisc. I knows what to do. Bring the bucket o' water here, Jack, will you?

[JACK gets it and brings it over to DAVIS.

An' you, Scotty, see if he's back on the hatch.

SCOTTY [*cautiously peering out*]. Aye, he's sittin' there the noo.

DAVIS. Sing out if he makes a move. Lift up the mattress, Drisc—careful now!

[DRISCOLL does so with infinite caution.

Take it out, Jack—careful—don't shake it now, for Christ's sake! Here, put it in the water—easy! There, that's fixed it!

[*They all sit down with great sighs of relief.*]

The water'll git in and spoil it.

[Then the question is discussed what to do with the criminal and with the box. Scotty reports that Smitty is coming back. They set on him and tie his hands. Smitty is amazed. They show him the bucket, and when he sees what is in it he tries to kick it over. He kicks Cocky on the shin, who curses and yells



## THE TECHNIQUE OF PLAY PRODUCTION

The last struggle brings *the climax of the play*. It should be marked by the most ruthless and brutal ferocity. Let it be remembered that no physical force is needed to give the right effect. If it is used the fight will get hopelessly out of control. Heavy breathing and muttered curses and instructions will help.

Will the infernal machine go off *as it is opened*?

The discovery of the letters brings an intended moment of anti-climax. But the play is not dead yet—Davis must see to that. The others are first puzzled, and then led on to a new excitement. The muffled sounds from Smitty are met with threats and derision—'gagging' is essential.

This sentence properly read gives a new fillip to suspicion where it is needed. Driscoll should get much slower on the words "black shadow," keep the same pace till "I mean," and follow the words with a significant look at the others.

The next part is quoted verbally because of its vital importance if the play is not to fall flat at the end. Consummate craftsmanship has been shown by the author, but the producer must do his part.

Davis's "Wait!" must be very sharp, and followed by a pause giving expectation of a new significance.

"On the envelope" is a little touch of irritation at Driscoll's exasperating slowness. The irritation rises, and the note of expectation.

The inevitable end of the name is seen dawning in the excited faces of the listeners.

Now rising sound plays a dominant part. Cocky's furious ejaculation merges into Davis's excited voice.

The others do more than look at Smitty. Menacing sounds and gestures are fused in a new outbreak of savage anger.

Davis's voice breaks in on the confused sound and stills it. *There must be no dead moment of silence.*

The tension subsides for a moment. The men are puzzled and disappointed that the "Berlin" clue seems to lead nowhere.

## BRINGING A PLAY TO LIFE

with pain. Another struggle ensues, and Smitty is subdued again. They take his keys from him. As Driscoll begins to open the box Smitty breaks loose, is thrown on the ground, and gagged. His feet are tied, and he is stood up against the wall on one side.

Driscoll opens the box and takes out a packet of letters. But Davis knows something about letters in war-time, and diverts the excitement from bombs to spies. Driscoll is made to read out one of the letters. It is a love-letter and includes the sentence, "But b'fore I can agree to live out my life wid you, you must prove to me that the black shadow—I won't mention uts hateful name, but you know what I mean—which might wrêck both our lives does not exist for you." When the letter is finished Jack's sympathies have all gone back to Smitty, and he suggests releasing him.]

DAVIS [*interrupting JACK sharply*]. Wait! Where's that letter from, Drisc?

DRISCOLL. There's no address on the top av ut.

DAVIS [*meaningly*]. What'd I tell you? Look at the postmark, Drisc—on the envelope.

DRISCOLL. The name that's written is Sidney Davidson, wan hundred an'—

DAVIS. Never mind that. O' course it's a false name. Look at the postmark.

DRISCOLL. There's a furrin stamp on it by the looks av ut. The mark's blurred so it's hard to read. [*He spells it out laboriously.*] B-e-r—the next is an l, I think—i—an' an n.

DAVIS [*excitedly*]. Berlin! What did I tell you? I knew them letters was from Germany.

COCKY [*shaking his fist in SMITTY's direction*]. Rotten 'ound!

[*The others look at SMITTY as if this last fact had utterly condemned him in their eyes.*]

DAVIS. Give me the letter, Drisc. Maybe I kin make something out of it.

[Davis, assisted by the others, studies the letter vainly. Driscoll also fails to find anything incriminating.]

DAVIS [*disgustedly*]. If we on'y had the code.

## THE TECHNIQUE OF PLAY PRODUCTION

The whole end of the play depends on the expectation which Driscoll puts into the word "Hullo!" and the reaction to it of his listeners. Their flagging hopes are revived for the last time.

"No dearest or sweetest," accompanied by a look at the others, must be made into evidence of sinister intent in the letter.

The expression of the men while the letter is being read must pass through three phases: they are first expectant, then puzzled, then utterly awkward and ashamed. Minute rehearsal is required, as the tiniest false reaction will spoil everything. The stage directions for what follows need no amplification.

The end of the play is masterly in both a psychological and dramatic sense. Driscoll's outburst is the last peak. It must be a real outburst of futile anger pretending it is unrepentant. It must first shock with surprise, and then convince irresistibly by its truth to character and situation.

The final stage directions are perfect and could do no more, but the performance of this episode is beyond stage directions. Timing, movement, and facial expression must be perfect in every minute detail. Only the most careful experiment at rehearsal can eliminate every false note and give that perfect psychological rightness to the ending which the play deserves.

## BRINGING A PLAY, TO LIFE

DRISCOLL [*taking up the bottom letter*]. Hullo! Here's one addressed to this ship—s.s. *Glencairn*, ut says—whin we was in Cape Town sivin months ago. [*Looking at the postmark*] Ut's from London.

DAVIS [*eagerly*]. Read it!

[*There is another choking groan from SMITTY.*

DRISCOLL [*reads slowly—his voice becomes lower and lower as he goes on*]. Ut begins with simply the name Sidney Davidson—no dearest or sweetest to this wan.

[Driscoll then reads the letter in which Edith takes her farewell of Smitty, since he prefers his drunkenness to her. When it is finished "the men cannot look at each other." Driscoll puts the letters back in the box, and the box under the mattress. He cuts Smitty's bonds and ungags him. Then:]

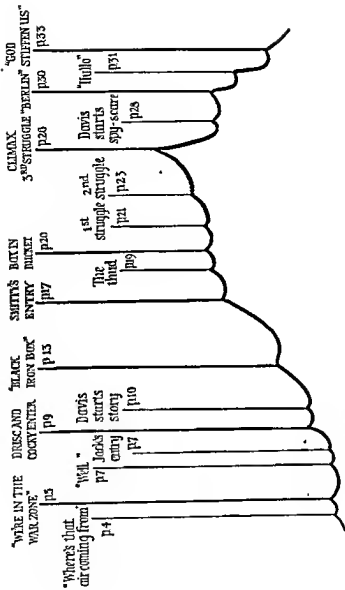
DRISCOLL [*stalks back to the others. There is a moment of silence, in which each man is in agony with the hopelessness of finding a word he can say. Then DRISCOLL explodes.*] God stiffen us, are we never goin' to turn in for a wink av sleep?

[*They all start as if awakening from a bad dream and gratefully crawl into their bunks, shoes and all, turning their faces to the wall, and pulling their blankets up over their shoulders. SCOTTY tiptoes past SMITTY out into the darkness. DRISCOLL turns down the light and crawls into his bunk as the curtain falls.*

It may be of some interest to students of production to plot the curves of suspense as they have been described in the commentary. The result is shown in the accompanying graph, where the thick pointers indicate the main peaks in the curves of suspense, and the thin pointers moments when an impulse is given in the movement of the curves. The pages quoted are those of the "Traveller's Library" edition of *The Moon of the Caribbees*. It is not claimed that there could not be detailed variations in the plotting of the curve, but those shown will, if followed, give a true representation of the play.

It has been impossible in the commentary to give more than occasional references to the 'orchestration' of sound, which must play a vital part in the interpretation of the play. The detailed use of voice-music depends on the instruments at the producer's disposal. But if he is not sensitive to the emotional value of the voices, as distinct from the words used, he cannot make the most of this play. Its power can be immeasurably increased by the subtle balancing of sound and silence, by the striking incidence of voice on voice, and by the 'orchestration' of all the voices to secure emotional effect. If the producer keeps his ear as well as his mind alert inspiration will respond to opportunity. He must remember that 'gagging' may be necessary sometimes to secure the desired background of sound.

Nothing has been said on the subject of the dialects used, but they should deter no serious company from embarking on the play. The dialects are important, but not difficult—they are such as come naturally to many actors (except for the Swedish and the Russian, which are entirely immaterial, since few of the audience will know whether they are right or wrong), and those who have trouble with them should always be able to find competent instructors (gramophone records should not be forgotten). The characterization, however, is far more important than the dialect. If the characters and their 'attack' are right the dialect will have to be very bad to spoil the play. The producer must not forget the importance of extreme clarity of diction for all



THE CURVES OF SUSPENSE OF "IN THE ZONE"

## THE TECHNIQUE OF PLAY PRODUCTION

the actors until the audience have had a chance to get used to their manner of speech.

The omission of reference to tempo will be noted. This is deliberate, because it seems likely that mention of it would complicate the issue. The play does not lend itself very easily to analysis of tempo, and the producer who forgets all about it and concentrates on achieving the curves of suspense will unconsciously have made it his servant. The tempo of the play is moderate throughout much of its course. It is slow in the first and in the last few minutes, and there are a few other slow moments; it quickens with the rise in tension—but this is a misleading generalization, because, as has been shown, moments of greatest tension are often marked by long pauses. On the whole, variations in tempo are in this play a dangerous medium for one who is not sensitive to the danger, on the one hand, of dragging, and, on the other, of rushing the big moments.

*In the Zone* is a play which no acting *tour de force* can bring off. It depends absolutely on team-work and good production. There is scope in it for bringing out most of the technical principles which have been described in previous chapters in relation to speech, movement, gesture (Davis's long speeches in particular will require all the devices for securing spontaneity), and, above all, the reactions of those not speaking; and these points have been but little touched on in the commentary. It is an object-lesson in the importance of significant detail. The producer must be on the watch at every moment for slight movements, gestures, and facial expressions, which, being wrong, will inevitably destroy the scene. In this play far more than in most, not only must there be no 'doing more on the night,' but every rehearsal must be perfect in detail as far as progress permits, and every rehearsal must be somehow better than the last. It is essentially (for amateurs) a producer's play. Only an expert producer can bring it flawlessly to life, and he can only do it by infinite attention to detail.

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